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COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS 4

Public Opinion

Vincent Price

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Foreword

Each volume in the Communication Concepts series deals at length with an idea of enduring importance to the study of human communication. Through analysis and interpretation of the scholarly literature, specialists in each area explore the uses to which a major concept has been put and point to promising directions for further work.

In this volume on public opinion, Vincent Price explores one of the central topics of our field. Communication in many forms has been inextricably linked with the analysis of public opinion for generations. But much of that linkage has heretofore been opaque; Price makes clear the many ways in which public opinion is, at its heart, a concept about communication processes and effects. To the student of communication, this enhances the relevance of the book; to those coming to the topic from other fields, this feature provides easy access to the communication literature. Price's analysis occupies a distinct position alongside the standard treatments of public opinion by political scientists, sociologists, and social psychologists.

The text begins with a historical examination of the concept of public opinion as it arose in Enlightenment philosophy. This requires consideration of the various conceptions of what *public* meant in classical democratic theory. That groundwork is followed by a careful explication of various 20th-century uses of *opinion* and related concepts. It becomes clear that the rise of the public opinion polling industry and the psychologist's connection between opinion and attitude have removed public opinion from its intellectual roots even as they have opened up fascinating new lines of inquiry.

The volume integrates these divergent notions in a discursive model of public opinion, focusing on interactions between and within social groupings that advance discussion of public issues. Price presents a cogent interpretation of aggregate models based on individual-level data and models "a public" as it is defined around an issue. His model maps the current literature and points the way to future research that would incorporate the roles of journalists, political actors, and pollsters in shaping public discourse.

This book juxtaposes the work of historians, philosophers, psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists of various stripes and offers scholars in those disciplines a view of public opinion as it is used in communication studies. For the student new to the subject, it provides a concise introduction to a vast topic, and yet it also ponders knotty conceptual problems that continue to occupy the best minds in the field.

—Ellen Wartella, *Associate Editor*
Steven H. Chaffee, *Series Editor*

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—Vincent Price

COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS 4

PUBLIC OPINION

VINCENT PRICE

1. Introduction

Public opinion is one of the most vital and enduring concepts in the social sciences. It is widely applied in psychology, sociology, history, political science, and communication research, both in academic and applied settings. Few concepts have engendered as much broad social concern, scientific interest, or intellectual debate. Certainly very few have roots that run as deeply into Western thought. Ideas about public opinion can be found in 18th-century philosophy, Renaissance literature, even in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Writings on public opinion have spanned the entire landscape of social inquiry, from the arguments of influential democratic theorists and social critics (e.g., Rousseau, 1762/1968; Bentham, 1838/1962; Bryce, 1888; Lowell, 1913; Lippmann, 1922) to the landmark works of sociology and social psychology (e.g., Tarde, 1890/1903; McDougall, 1920; Allport, 1924) and the seminal empirical studies of mass media effects (e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949).

In spite of its currency, the concept of public opinion remains controversial. Since the advent of survey techniques and their application to public opinion in the early part of the 20th century, analysts have been continually forced to refine, adapt, and extend age-old conceptual and theoretical notions in the light of empirical research efforts. Along the way, researchers have often been divided in their conceptual approaches—even in their definition of

public opinion itself. Is it a simple aggregation of individual views (Childs, 1939)? Or is it instead a collective-level, emergent product of debate and discussion that cannot be "reduced" to individuals (Cooley, 1902; Blumer, 1948)? The difficulty of defining public opinion as an object of empirical study was perhaps best expressed by Key in 1961. "To speak with precision of public opinion," he noted, "is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost" (p. 8).

The research literature on public opinion is vast, continually growing, and beset by theoretical debate. Even for active researchers in the field, the task of sorting through writings on public opinion can be quite daunting. For this reason, this present book is intended as a map of this sprawling research terrain, designed to serve as an introduction to the major conceptual pathways and bridges that link public opinion research across diverse disciplines.

Outline of the Volume

Baker (1990) suggested that the idea of public opinion, as conceived during the 18th century, was implicitly paradoxical. In conferring the title "public" on opinion, Enlightenment thinkers implied universality, objectivity, and rationality. On the other hand, the concept of opinion itself suggested considerable flux, subjectivity, and uncertainty (Baker, 1990, p. 168). Connecting the concepts *public* and *opinion* represented a liberal-philosophical attempt to unite the "one" and the "many," to link the collective welfare to individual ideas and preferences. It is no wonder, then, that efforts to define the concept vacillate between holistic viewpoints, which locate public opinion in the realm of the collective, and reductionistic definitions, which trace it to individuals.

In view of its compound, even paradoxical nature, public opinion is analyzed in this book largely in dialectical fashion. This method is apparent in the general outline of the volume, which first treats separately and then tries to bring together the collective and individual aspects of the concept. The discussion also attempts to highlight other important dialectics—between social stability and social change, between thought and action, between elite and mass—that find their expression, if not their resolution, in the concept of public opinion. Readers should be forewarned that the book proposes no single, comprehensive definition of public opinion. It aims instead at identifying the principal themes running through the various literatures that invoke the concept.

The volume also follows a chronological course. I begin by introducing some of the long-standing concepts, philosophical questions, and political problems that have shaped thinking about public opinion. Chapter 2 explores the history behind the development of the concept, particularly its origins in 18th- and 19th-century democratic political philosophy, and identifies some of the enduring questions and normative concerns about public opinion that have motivated social scientific research.

Chapter 3 discusses conceptual approaches to understanding the *public* as a collective entity. There I investigate sociological conceptions—mainly developed in the early part of the 20th century—that framed the public as a transitory and loosely organized social group emerging out of discussion and debate over an issue. This formulation of the public, which essentially viewed it as an instance of collective behavior, was eclipsed by individual-level opinion research after the advent of polling techniques and advancements in attitude measurement. Nevertheless, a review of the collective groupings that are variously invoked in contemporary public opinion research suggests that the traditional sociological model is, at least implicitly, still with us.

Chapter 4 discusses conceptual approaches to understanding *opinions*. The refinement of survey techniques and attitude measurement brought public opinion research to the fore of American social science in the 1930s and 1940s, and with this burst of research came a shift of conceptual and theoretical attention to individual opinions and their determinants. Topics treated in Chapter 4 include the primary properties of opinions as they are conceptualized and measured in most survey research; the origin and development of opinions through communication; and the relationships between opinions and other closely related concepts such as attitudes, beliefs, and values.

Thus major sections of the book treat public opinion in terms of either collective behavior (Chapter 3) or as an individual phenomenon (Chapter 4). The volume's final chapter works toward an integrative view of public opinion that has both collective and individual aspects. Specifically, attention is given to the *communication processes* that allow people to organize into publics and to exercise their influence. Chapter 5 focuses on explicating the concept of *public*

debate, concluding with a review of the ways in which public opinion researchers try to observe that process as it unfolds over time.

2. *Problems of Public Opinion*

Many writers on public opinion begin, reasonably enough, by posing the basic question of What exactly do we mean by public opinion? Any search for a single, clear definition of the concept will, however, prove fruitless. In an entry on public opinion research prepared for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Davison (1968) noted that there is "no generally accepted definition" of the term (p. 188). The absence is certainly not for any lack of effort. Noelle-Neumann (1984) points out that "generations of philosophers, jurists, historians, political theorists, and journalism scholars have torn their hair in the attempt to provide a clear definition" (p. 58). Childs (1965) was able to compile four dozen different accounts of the meaning of public opinion, observing that the literature of the field is "strewn with zealous attempts" (p. 14).

To admit that an acceptable general definition of the concept is probably out of reach, however, is certainly not to say that public opinion is in any sense meaningless. The concept continues to be used in research, in writings about government, and in explanations of human social behavior, both scientific and otherwise. And the fact of its continued use stands as firm testimony to its meaningfulness. To understand the concept of public opinion, we ought to inquire about the various problems to which the concept has been applied. Rather than to arrive at any single definition of public opinion, our goal is to understand its different uses. As Kaplan (1964) noted, "The meaning of a term is a family affair among its various senses" (p. 48).

The problems that originally gave rise to the concept of public opinion are not necessarily the same problems that sustain its use today. Yet there are many common themes that run through writings on public opinion, spanning several centuries. The aim of this chapter is thus twofold. First, I review the historical origins of

public opinion as a concept, taking note of the various ways in which the idea was applied in formulating democratic models of society in the 18th and 19th centuries. Then moving forward in time, I discuss the close relationship between interest in the new force of public opinion in society and the expansive growth of the mass media during the late 19th and 20th centuries, paying particular attention to some recurring worries and fears about the status of modern public opinion. As we will see in subsequent chapters, many contemporary research applications not only share the conceptual legacy of public opinion as it has evolved historically, they also continue to reflect the same fundamental worries about its soundness.

Origins of the Idea

The concept of public opinion is largely a product of the Enlightenment. The idea is closely wedded to liberal political philosophies of the late 17th and 18th centuries (e.g., Locke, 1690/1963; Rousseau, 1762/1968) and especially 19th-century democratic theory (e.g., Bentham, 1838/1962). Although it is not my intention here to conduct a thorough historical review of the development of the concept of public opinion—and certainly not my goal to review the course of political philosophy—it is nonetheless useful to review the original ways in which the term was used.[1]

Anticipations and approximations. Although the concept was not explicitly propounded until the 18th century, many earlier writings included "anticipations and approximations of modern theorizing about public opinion" (Palmer, 1936, p. 231). The political philosophy of ancient Greece, for example, dealt with the pitfalls and potential benefits of popular rule. Plato readily disparaged democratic politics, seeing philosophy as the rightful director of human affairs and questioning the competence of any large number of people to deliberate philosophical concerns. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that the collective sentiments of the *demos* could contribute a sort of common sense to political affairs (Minar, 1960, p. 38-39). In spite of references in classical works to phenomena that resemble public opinion, however, the modern distinctions between the state and society at large and between specialized officials and the general public were not actually a part of the

political philosophy of Athens (Held, 1987, p. 17-18). The combination of the terms *opinion* and *public* into a compound concept having political significance appears only much later, in the liberal and democratic philosophies of the 1700s.

Early conceptions of opinion. Well before its casting in liberal and democratic terms, there were in general two discernible senses of the word *opinion*, which persist even today (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 89-90). The first sense is essentially epistemological and stems from its use in distinguishing a matter of judgment from a matter of fact, or something uncertain from something known to be true, either by demonstration or by faith. This notion—taken from the Latin expression *opinio* and perhaps the earliest sense of the term—is still reflected in general use today, as when someone refers to a particular assertion as "a matter of opinion" rather than a point of fact (see Hume, 1777/1975 on the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact). When linked to society at large, the term sometimes takes on a pejorative quality, reflected in such early expressions as "common opinion," "general opinion," and "vulgar opinion" (the latter incorporating the Latin *vulgus*, meaning "the common people, the mob"). Despite its sometimes negative connotations, opinion used in this epistemological manner essentially relates to a cognitive state, to a lower form of knowing.

A second, related sense of opinion, by some contemporary accounts more closely connected to its modern connotations, equates it with manners, morals, and customs (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, 1984). Here the emphasis is on the role of popular opinion as a kind of informal social pressure and social control. Opinion is equated with reputation, esteem, and the general regard of others, of interest principally because it constrains human behavior (Speier, 1950, p. 378). This understanding of opinion eventually became crystallized in the writings of Locke (1690/1975), who identified three general laws that govern human conduct: the divine law, the civil law, and the "law of opinion or reputation" (which he elsewhere called the "law of fashion" and the "law of private censure"). Rather than casting opinion as a way of knowing, this sense of the term focuses on social approbation or censure—opinion as a way of informally condoning or condemning. Opinion, seen in this light, is generally prejudicial and nonrational, akin to sentiment as opposed to reason (Ozouf, 1988, pp. S1-S2).

Early conceptions of public. The term *public* had many different senses in early usage, but here again we can point to two in particular that are worthy of note. The Latin phrase *publicus* was most likely derived from *poplicus* or *populus*, meaning "the people." But there were at least two distinct reflections of the people present in early uses of the word public. In one sense of the term, public referred to common access, as in a "public place." According to Habermas (1962/1989, p. 6), the *res publica* was any property generally open to the population, and in feudal times the commons was regarded as public because general access was provided to the fountain and market square. The fundamental concept is one of openness or availability. Much the same notion is still in use today, as when we employ the verb *publicize* to refer to the process of making something widely available.

Perhaps more predominant was the use of the term public in reference to matters of general concern and, more specifically, to matters of office and state (Speier, 1950). This second sense of the term has little to do with common access, focusing instead on common interest or the common good. As Ozouf (1988, p. S2) points out, before the 1830s French dictionaries opposed *public* not to *privé* ("private"), but instead to *particulier* ("particular, individual"). The same idea persists today in references to "public works" and "public law." A government building may be considered public, even if it is not open to everyone. Before the evolution of the contemporary concept of government, the personal accoutrements and activities of rulers were considered public. In medieval writings *lordly* and *public* were used synonymously and *publicare* meant to claim for the lord (Habermas, 1962/1989). Under the theory of royal absolutism, prominent in Europe before the 18th century, the monarch was considered the only public person—"the source and principle of unity in a particularistic society" (Baker, 1990). The term public later came to refer generally to the state as it evolved "into an entity having an objective existence over and against the person of the ruler" (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 11). Today, drawing largely on these early connections between the term public and the collective welfare, we can hardly avoid associating things public with things governmental.

Although the notion of public opinion did not emerge until the Enlightenment, both *opinion* and *public* carried with them before that time multiple uses that remain related to our contemporary

understanding of the concepts. Most notably, *opinion* was used to refer both to rational/cognitive and to nonrational/social processes—a duality carried over into virtually all subsequent writings on public opinion. The term *public* shared a similar dual usage. To follow the famous words of Abraham Lincoln, the word public originally meant both "*of* the people" (when referring to common access) and "*for* the people" (when referring to the common good). It only came to mean "*by* the people" (that is, carried out by common people, the sense in which we often think of the term today) much later.

The Birth of Public Opinion

The combination of *public* and *opinion* into a single term, used to refer to collective judgments outside the sphere of government that affect political decision making, occurred following several large-scale social, economic, and political trends in Europe (Speier, 1950; Lazarsfeld, 1957; Ginsberg, 1986). Although at least one historian credits the English with using the phrases "opinion of the people" and "opinion of the public" as early as 1741 (Gunn, 1983), the French are most often viewed as the inventors and popularizers of the concept (Habermas, 1962/1989; Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Ozouf, 1988). Noelle-Neumann (1984) credits Rousseau with first using the phrase *l'opinion publique* around 1744, employing it in the second sense of opinion defined above, as a reference to the social customs and manners of society (see also Baker, 1990). At any rate, by 1780 French writers were making rather extensive use of public opinion to refer to a political rather than a social phenomenon, often in conjunction with "common will" (*bien public*), "public spirit" (*esprit public*), "public conscience" (*conscience publique*), and other related terms (Ozouf, 1988, p. S3).

The historical forces at work had originally begun as early as the 15th century, with the advent of printing by means of movable type (Childs, 1965). This technological development allowed for the widespread dissemination of literature, which gathered strength in the 16th century with the growth of merchant and business classes and an expansion of literacy. The latter trend was greatly assisted by the Protestant Reformation, which created a broad reading public, without any formal mediation by the church, for

religious literature written in the vernacular (Speier, 1950, p. 381). The professionalization of the arts, particularly literature, replaced the earlier patronage system with one in which authors and artists depended for their sustenance on popular support (Habermas, 1962/1989). Reading societies and secondhand bookstores began to flourish, and by the late 1700s political and moral literature was quite popular among the learned classes (Speier, 1950; Habermas, 1962/1989; Darnton, 1982).

The Reformation proved important for several reasons beyond its effect on the circulation of literature. The teachings of Calvin and Luther challenged the long-standing sociopolitical order of papal authority and jurisdiction. Perhaps even more critically, the Protestant teachings contained at their core a new and individualistic conception of the person. They sanctioned secular authority in all but the directly moral and religious domains of life and supported the idea that individuals are "masters of their own destinies" (Held, 1987, p. 40). By the late 17th century, the ideas first unleashed by the Reformation had evolved into more sweeping liberal philosophies (e.g., Locke, 1690/1963), which asserted that individuals should be free to follow their own preferences in all aspects of life—religious, economic, and political (Held, 1987, pp. 51-54).

Emergence of a public sphere. Habermas (1962/1989) argues that these historical trends, tied closely to the growth of capitalism and the ascendancy of a European bourgeoisie, eventually resulted in a critically reasoning *public sphere.* Over the course of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, a variety of novel social institutions came to prominence: the coffeehouses of England (there were said to be more than 2,000 in London by the early 18th century), the salons of Paris, and the table societies (*Tistchgesellschaften*) of Germany (Speier, 1950). These gathering places, where devotion to literature and the art of conversation were held in high esteem, came to represent—particularly the French salons—places where authority of argument supplanted the authority of title. According to Habermas, the literary public of the 18th century gained political force as the bourgeoisie consolidated and began to articulate a liberal critique of the existing absolutist state, primarily through the circulation of political literature and its widespread discussion in the salons and coffeehouses. Free exchange of information and critical, open reasoning, became the instruments of "public

self-assertion" in political affairs (Nathans, 1990, p. 625). With the growth of a politically active public sphere, public opinion emerged as a new form of political authority—one with which the bourgeoisie could challenge absolute rule.

Habermas (1962/1989) emphasizes the rational and egalitarian features of public opinion during the Enlightenment (pp. 36-37). First, it is seen as emanating from reasoned discourse, from active conversation and debate. This debate is "public" in the sense that it aims at determining the common will or general good—it is not merely a clash of individual interests. The debate is also open; the process is "public" in the sense that open participation, if not entirely ensured, is desired. It is sovereign and egalitarian; it operates independently from social and economic status, giving way to the merits of ideas rather than to political power. Finally, the debate must be enlightened through full publicity of political affairs and their consequences if it is to render correct judgments. As we will see, these notions would have much to do with later, systematic attempts by sociologists (e.g., Park, 1904/1972; Blumer, 1946; Mills, 1956) to define more precisely the nature of the public as a social collective (Chapter 4). These features provided the outline of what later came to be called the "classical" model of public opinion (Berelson, 1950; Lazarsfeld, 1957), and they provide a set of standards by which public opinion, even in modern societies, is sometimes judged (see Carey, 1978; Peters, 1989).

Ambiguities in the meaning of public opinion. Habermas's (1962/1989) account has been influential, although historians have raised questions about the accuracy of his interpretation, particularly his Marxist reading of the public sphere as an aspect of capitalist/bourgeois ascendancy (Nathans, 1990, p. 626). It is also debatable whether the egalitarian, critical, and rational features ascribed to 18th-century public opinion square well with the views of public opinion that were prevalent (particularly in France) at the time. For instance, Darnton's (1982) analysis of 18th-century French journalism challenges the rational image of public discourse. Darnton proposes that much of the political literature that circulated in prerevolutionary France was not high-minded liberal philosophy but instead rather sensationalistic and celebrity-oriented moral criticism ("politicopornography" is Darnton's term) that relied on themes of sexual depravity and corruption (pp. 34-38).

Other historians have suggested that Enlightenment intellectuals were far from unqualified egalitarians (Nathans, 1990). Many were in fact deeply ambivalent about individualism and the value of open contestation in politics. Baker (1990) argues that French political thinkers in the mid-18th century were wary of the extreme liberty enjoyed by the English, which seemed to invite divisiveness, endless confrontation, and political instability. There was thus considerable reluctance to embrace the complete emancipation of the individual (Ozouf, 1988). Although Rousseau (1762/1968) argued that the common good, or "general will," is only discernible through direct and continuous participation of free individuals debating collective choices, he did not champion the clash of individual interests. Instead, he believed that members of the public, in coming together to decide what is best for their community, surrender their private interests and concerns to the common welfare (see Pateman, 1970, p. 25; Held, 1987). The problem of how to divine public opinion out of a conflicting mass of individual opinions was a central dilemma of liberal political philosophy. The autonomy of public opinion borne of reason was one solution. While vague as to exactly what public opinion was, a great many writers clearly indicated that it was not the opinion of the multitude. It was instead an "anonymous and impersonal tribunal," a new court that had many of the same attributes—"infallibility, externality, and unity"—that characterized the old, absolutist authority (Ozouf, 1988, p. S11-S12; Baker, 1990). This notion—that public opinion transcends individual opinion and reflects an abstract, common good rather than a mere compromise of individual interests—would continue to influence thinking about public opinion well into the 20th century (e.g., Lowell, 1913, pp. 8-10; Berelson, 1950).

Those who first wrote of public opinion were rarely explicit about the group of people to which it referred. Ozouf (1988, p. S6) suggests that public opinion was often implicitly equated by the French with the opinion of the "men of letters," referring to their (largely self-accorded) role as arbiters of social and political affairs. A second "sociologically qualifiable group of bearers of opinion" were the *parlements*, which took the license of circulating their protests against the king in an effort to win public "enthusiasm" to their favor (p. S7). As both Ozouf (1988) and Baker (1990) point out, however, public opinion was not only invoked in the context

of criticizing the monarchy. Baker argues that the concept took hold in the wake of a gradual dissipation of absolute authority. Amid a crisis of absolutism, the French crown and its opponents together "invented and appealed to a principle of legitimacy beyond [the existing] system in order to press their competing claims" (Baker, 1990, p. 171). *The public* was mainly a political or ideological construct without any clear sociological referent; it provided an implicit new system of authority in which the government and its critics had to claim the judgment of public opinion to secure their respective aims. "Indeed, one can understand the conflicts of the Pre-Revolution as a series of struggles to fix the sociological referent of the concept in favor of one or another competing group" (Baker, 1990, p. 186). Habermas notwithstanding, public opinion was more than simply the instrument of a nascent bourgeoisie.

Necker, the person often credited with popularizing the phrase *l'opinion publique* during the 1780s, served the French crown as minister of finance (Palmer, 1936; Baker, 1990). In some ways Necker's application of the phrase is quite modern in spirit. He used the term to refer to a growing dependence of the government's financial status on the opinion of its creditors. Necker recognized that support from the French elite was necessary for success of the government's policies. Toward that end, he advocated full publicity of state activities. He published a statement of the government's accounts (the *Compte Rendu* of 1781), principally to calm public creditors and reassure them of the security of the national treasury (Speier, 1950; Baker, 1990). Necker may thus have been among the first to propose systematic governmental public relations. "Only fools, pure theorists, or apprentices," he observed in 1792, "fail to take public opinion into account" (cited in Palmer, 1936).

Public opinion and majority rule. Although the coffeehouses and salons of the Enlightenment gave rise to the original idea of public opinion, 18th-century writers left the concept vague in many respects. Public opinion was linked to discussion and to the free flow of information, it was supposed to reflect the common good, and it was cast as a new and powerful tribunal for checking the actions of the state. But other key aspects of our contemporary conception of public opinion find their origins in later writings on representative democracy, such as those of Madison (1788/1966) and especially the English "utilitarian" theorists Bentham (1838/1962) and Mill (1824/1937).

Writings from the 18th century that employ the term public opinion referred to social behavior generally or, when referring to its political impact, were unclear about the precise mechanisms by which it ought to influence governmental affairs. Over the course of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, however, the work of Mill and Bentham spelled out a much more formal political role for public opinion in government, cast in legislative and electoral terms. In contrast to Rousseau, these writers argued that people behave primarily to satisfy their individual desires and to avoid pain (Schumpeter, 1943; Held, 1987). Society consists then of individuals seeking to maximize their own interests and utilities. A mechanism was needed for harmonizing these disparate interests. The answer to the problem of resolving separate and conflicting interests was rule by the majority, established by regular election and plebiscite. Public opinion, in this majoritarian view, was best expressed as the "agglomerate interests of the men of the community" (Minar, 1960, p. 36). The state was to have essentially the role of umpire or referee over individuals and groups vying to maximize their interests through economic competition and free exchange. Hence "the free vote and the free market were the *sine qua non*" (Held, 1987, p. 67).

Minar (1960) argues that the utilitarian democratic model is the most characteristic modern outlook on public opinion, basically underlying 20th-century efforts to measure and quantify it regularly through the institution of opinion polling. The points of divergence between the utilitarian conception of public opinion and earlier Enlightenment notions lie principally in differing proposals for determining the common good. Earlier liberal thinking (e.g., Rousseau) saw public opinion as a way of realizing the common will, best discerned through continuous popular involvement in the form of reasoned and egalitarian debate. In the newer formulation, public opinion is instead resolved through a maximizing function of separate individual wills, that is, through majority rule. The idea most true to the general will gives way in the utilitarian framework to the most commonly held idea. This is not to say that active public debate was no longer part of the picture—far from it. Freedom of the press was vigorously endorsed by Bentham and Mill. Following Necker's view, Bentham saw the press as a particularly important organ of what he called "the public opinion tribunal." Harkening back to notions of common

opinion as social pressure, he called for the regular publicity of all government activities as a safeguard against abuses of power (Palmer, 1936, p. 245). Such views of the press anticipate in significant ways our contemporary notion of freedom of information and the modern characterization of the media as a watchdog for the public (Commission on Freedom of the Press [Commission], 1947; see also Macaulay, 1898, on the press as the fourth estate). But continuous popular involvement in debating political affairs was not in itself proposed as the best or most practical mechanism for determining the common good; instead, the resolution of popular desires rested in the choice of the majority, as expressed through regular elections.

A second consequential shift in conceptualization also accompanied majoritarian democratic philosophy. The public itself, defined vaguely in earlier writings as those members of the learned classes who frequented the coffeehouses and salons, is in the newer framework identified explicitly with the eligible electorate. Bentham argued in his later writings for universal suffrage and annual parliamentary elections to maintain close public guard over representatives—the "deputies" of the people (Pateman, 1970). The upshot was a considerable expansion in the size and heterogeneity of "the public." Some suggest that Bentham's model of democracy—like Rousseau's—assumed that every citizen would be competent to form political opinions on pressing matters of the day (e.g., Schumpeter, 1943). However, Pateman (1970) concludes that neither Mill nor Bentham harbored particularly high expectations concerning the ability of this expanded electorate to deliberate policy actively. These theorists were more concerned, Pateman (1970) insists, with the public's ability to select and reject representatives than with its ability to hold informed political opinions as such (p. 18-19).

Public Opinion as an Object of Study

Up to the mid-19th century, the bulk of writings dealing with public opinion were normative and philosophical in nature, being studies in political theory rather than studies of public opinion itself. (Necker's writings are a notable exception.) Although representative democratic theory gained increasing support over the course of the 19th century, writings of this era were by no means

of a single mind in evaluating the competence of public opinion. Supporters of liberal and democratic reforms saw it "as the voice of the enlightened middle class, as a safeguard against misrule, and as an agent of progress," whereas more conservative critics understood it antithetically as potentially dangerous, shallow, and transitory; largely misinformed; and in need of practical limitations as a political force (Palmer, 1936, p. 247).

Toward the close of the 19th century, public opinion came under increasingly systematic analysis in the empirical manner characteristic of the developing social sciences (Lazarsfeld, 1957). Writers were intrigued by the "new force" of public opinion in society, which seemed to be gaining power and expanding to nearly all social classes with gains in education and with the emergence of more efficient means of mass communication (Bryce, 1888; Tarde, 1890/1903; Cooley, 1902; Lowell, 1913). As 1900 approached, there was a shift of both focus and method in the analysis of public opinion. In tandem with the growth of the social sciences within the academy, 20th-century works on public opinion more clearly reflected sociological and psychological rather than political and philosophical concerns. Whereas many earlier discussions of public opinion had dealt primarily with the philosophical problem of transmuting separate, individual wills into the will of the state, analysts now increasingly turned their attention to the problem of understanding the social and behavioral aspects of public opinion. Interest shifted to "the question of the function and powers of public opinion in society, the means by which it can be modified or controlled, and the relative importance of emotional and intellectual factors in its formulation" (Binkley, 1928, p. 393). This line of inquiry routed the study of public opinion into new academic fields: collective behavior and social psychology, attitude and opinion research, propaganda analysis, political behavior, and mass communication research.

Enduring Problems of Public Opinion

By the dawn of the 20th century, many of the underlying concepts and conceptual distinctions that would surface in later theoretical writings and empirical research on public opinion had in one way or another already come to light (Lasswell, 1957). Although cast

principally in terms of informed debate and majority rule (as a legacy of the Enlightenment and of representative democratic theory, respectively) the term public opinion carried with it other important senses as well. Enlightenment writers, in spite of their emphasis on human reason and the progress of society through education, did not fail to grasp the nonrational, emotional aspects of public opinion. For example, Speier (1950) recounts the efforts of some Enlightenment thinkers to establish public spectacles and national celebrations deliberately aimed at enlisting patriotic sentiment rather than thoughtful support. Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, the role of general opinion as enforcer of mores and social customs, in keeping with Locke's "law of fashion," did not escape critical notice (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Certainly, the general strikes and riots of the 19th century gave students of opinion pause for concern about the supposed rational nature of public opinion. The nonrational aspects of public behavior were carefully explored in the latter part of the 19th century by writers who devoted special attention to imitative behavior and emotional "contagion" in crowds (e.g., Tarde, 1890/1903; LeBon, 1895/1960; see also Mackay, 1841/1956; Chapter 3).

Although to some extent social scientific research and normative, philosophical analyses of public opinion have gone separate ways since the turn of the 20th century, there is still an important and lively connection between them. Empirical findings bearing on how public opinion develops and operates in society cannot help but be interpreted in light of how we think public opinion *ought* to be working (Berelson, 1950). Thoughtful considerations of the underlying normative questions concerning public opinion have continued throughout the 20th century: Lowell (1913), Lippmann (1922), Dewey (1927), Lasswell (1941), Mills (1956), Schattschneider (1960), and Ginsberg (1986) are just a few examples of such thinkers.

To close this chapter—and to set a frame around the social scientific concepts and research applications in the chapters to come—we should briefly consider some of the enduring fears and concerns that have motivated and sustained public opinion research. For the sake of simplicity, we can organize this discussion around five basic problems plaguing the modern public: two relate to its potential superficiality—lack of competence and lack of resources—and three concern its potential susceptibility—to the

tyranny of the majority, to propaganda or mass persuasion, and to subtle domination by elite minorities.

Lack of competence. Reservations about the ability of the public at large to guide political affairs date back, as we have seen, at least as far as Plato and were prominent during the Enlightenment. But perhaps the strongest indictments of government by popular opinion are products of the 20th century—Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922) and its sequel *The Phantom Public* (1925). Lippmann's principal argument was that democratic theory asked far too much of ordinary citizens. They could not be expected to behave as legislators, to be active and involved in all the pertinent issues of the day. Part of the problem, in Lippmann's estimation, was the public's general inattention and lack of concern about political affairs. As Bryce (1888) had noted, "public questions come in the third or fourth rank among the interests of life" (p. 8). People invest little time or energy learning the necessary, "unseen facts" of the political world. Compounding the problem was the manner in which opinions—based on the "pictures in our heads," as Lippmann (1922, p. 3) said—are developed. Accurate knowledge of public affairs, on which sound opinions must be based, is simply unavailable to the ordinary citizen. The political world is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 29). Citizens form their ideas from sorely incomplete accounts, having little or no contact with actual events; they filter all they see and hear through their own prejudices and fears. Although in simpler societies rule by public opinion might succeed, the modern industrial world had become too large and too complicated. "The private citizen today," Lippmann wryly observed, "has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake" (1925, p. 13).

The press, considered by progressive democrats to be a tool for educating and developing the public (e.g., Cooley, 1909), merely contributed to the ills of popular opinion in Lippmann's view. "It is not workable," he stated flatly, "and when you consider the nature of news, it is not even thinkable. . . . If the newspapers are to be charged with the duty of translating the whole public life of mankind, they fail, they are bound to fail, in any future one can conceive they will continue to fail" (1922, p. 362).

Lippmann was not the first to point out the discrepancy between the image of public participation in a democracy—inherited from

the salons and coffeehouses of an earlier era—and the workings of mass opinion in a modern legislative nation (see Tocqueville, 1835/1945; Bryce, 1888), but his writings were notable for their vigor and insight and, especially, for the radical reworking of democratic governance they advocated. Abandoning hope of competent grass-roots opinion, Lippmann believed that modern public opinion would not improve unless an independent, expert organization, staffed by "political scientists," could make "the unseen facts intelligible" to decision makers and "organize public opinion" for the press (1922, p. 32). He envisioned a network of intelligence-gathering agencies (one for each federal cabinet office) with independent sources of funding, guaranteed tenure, and unrestricted "access to the facts," to accomplish those tasks (1922, p. 386).

Lack of resources. Later critics, although not disagreeing with Lippmann's general portrait of modern public opinion, nonetheless took exception to his appraisal of the public's fitness for democratic rule. Most prominently, Dewey (1927) argued that the problem was not incompetence on the part of the public but rather a lack of sufficient methods for public communication. "The physical and external means of collecting information," he observed, "have far outrun the intellectual phase of inquiry and organization of its results" (p. 180). Unlike Lippmann, who thought that the Great Society could never become the Great Community required for a true national democracy, Dewey (1927) believed that this was indeed conceivable, even though it would never possess all the qualities of a local community (p. 211). Part of the answer is education. It is not necessary that people have the knowledge and skill to carry out systematic investigations for every common concern, Dewey suggested, only that they have the ability to judge the knowledge supplied by experts on those concerns (p. 209). He agreed with Lippmann that the social sciences would play a central role in correcting the democratic state, but Dewey envisioned a very different kind of role. He proposed not a high-level, expert system of intelligence but, instead, a kind of community-based social science that would disseminate its interpretations to the public via artful presentations in the popular press. "The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That is *the* problem of the public" (Dewey, 1927, p. 208). Along similar lines, a chapter title from

Lasswell's (1941) *Democracy Through Public Opinion* stated the matter succinctly: "Democracy Needs a New Way to Talk."

Others have also seen the primary issue as one of providing appropriate resources for the public. Schattschneider (1960), for example, argued that if there is indeed a problem with public opinion, it rests with the assumptions claimed for classical democratic theory (i.e., the need for omnicompetent citizens), not with the public itself. "People are able to survive in the modern world by learning what they need to know and what they do not need to know," he argued (p. 137). Citizens need not be involved in all the day-to-day details of government. When necessary, they become naturally involved by conflict, when their concerns and interests are at stake. What citizens *need*, Schattschneider suggests, is a competitive political system with strong leadership, controversy, and clear alternatives (p. 129). Other critics have made similar arguments, laying blame in one way or another, not at the feet of the public but at the door of the representative's chamber or the editor's office (e.g., Entman, 1989). The solution, it has been suggested, lies in offering better resources—principally through the mass media—for the public to use (Commission, 1947).

Tyranny of the majority. A third enduring problem of concern to analysts of public opinion is the danger that a kind of mediocrity in opinion will prevail—the lowest common denominator—created and maintained by the pressure of the majority. Seen another way, the danger is that in the face of large majorities, important minority viewpoints, even when valid, will not be strongly asserted. This fear had been expressed early in the 19th century by Tocqueville (1835/1945), who warned that in a society of equals, individuals in the minority would be left "alone and unprotected" against a dominant majority (p. 138). Throughout the 20th century, the problem of conformity to majority opinion has been a persistent theme, both in social criticism and in social science (White, 1961; Allen, 1975). Noelle-Neumann (1984) reasserted these concerns in public opinion research, referring to the retreat of the minority in the face of majority pressure as a "spiral of silence."

Many analysts have warned that the power of the majority could become increasingly problematic over time. "The longer public opinion has ruled," Bryce (1888) suggested, "the more absolute is the authority of the majority likely to become, the less likely are

energetic minorities to arise, the more are politicians likely to occupy themselves, not in forming opinion, but in discovering and hastening to obey it" (p. 23). The answer to the problem, Bryce and other critics have proposed, is proper democratic socialization and education (see Lowell, 1913). A democracy must cultivate a vigorous individuality in its citizens to ensure that minority concerns are adequately pressed.[2]

Susceptibility to persuasion. A fourth concern centers on the susceptibility of the public to persuasion and, in particular, to highly emotional and nonrational appeals. This concern certainly seems warranted. The extent to which emotional appeals are part and parcel of politics has been quite commonly observed (Kornhauser, 1959; Edelman, 1964). Lippmann (1925), to take an early example, noted that "the making of one general will out of a multitude of separate wishes is not an Hegelian mystery, as so many political philosophers have imagined, but an art well known to leaders, politicians and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas" (p. 47).

The success of fascist regimes in Europe between the world wars, coupled with their extensive use of mass communications, fueled tremendous interest among American social scientists in the analysis of propaganda and persuasion. The panic caused by Orson Welles's broadcast of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* in 1938 (Cantril, Gaudet, & Herzog, 1940) suggested that the capacities of the media for precipitating irrational mass behavior were considerable. Not surprisingly, throughout this century public opinion research and concerns about mass persuasion have gone hand in hand. From 1927, when Lasswell published his influential *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, until well into the 1950s, the study of public opinion and of propaganda were very closely connected. Many of the early readers in the field, for instance, bore the word propaganda in their titles (e.g., Smith, Lasswell, & Casey, 1946; Doob, 1948; Katz, Cartwright, Eldersveld, & Lee, 1954).

Domination by elites. Although some have feared an overabundance of power in the hands of the public, many others worry that too little is held. A fifth continuing cause for concern about public opinion in modern democracies focuses on what Ginsberg (1986) has called "the domestication of mass belief." Here the problem is seen as one of increasing passivity on the part of public, leading in

various ways to its domination by government and corporate elites. Mills (1956), for example, saw American society as consisting of three hierarchical strata: the first, a narrow stratum of power elite; the second, a stalemated collection of counterbalancing political forces; and the third, a large and increasingly powerless mass of citizens. Far from enjoying the idealized, free-flowing discussion of democratic debate, Mills argued, the American population had been transformed by the mass media into a *market* that consumes, rather than a *public* that produces, ideas and opinions (see also Habermas, 1962/1989; Gitlin, 1978).

Other forms of domination have been proposed by contemporary critics, who see different mechanisms of elite control (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Ginsberg (1986) has argued that with the advent of electoral democracy, the traditionally adversarial relationship between the people and their government has been supplanted by one of dependence. Now people willingly support the state, having grown increasingly dependent on its services. As he tells it, "with the development of electoral institutions, the expression of mass opinion became less disruptive; when citizens began to see government as a source of benefits, opinion became fundamentally less hostile to central authority . . . in short, western regimes converted mass opinion from a hostile, unpredictable, and often disruptive force into a less dangerous and more tractable phenomenon" (p. 58). Ginsberg sees the opinion polling industry itself, despite its stated intentions of increasing the democratic voice of the people (Gallup & Rae, 1940), as a central part of this domestication process. Along similar lines, Habermas (1962/1989) argues that mechanisms of political consensus formation in modern democratic nations, such as regular polls and popular election campaigns—although indeed ensuring periodic pressure on governments to satisfy basic needs of the population—do not foster, and may even suppress, the rational argumentation or wide ranging popular discussion characteristic of a true public sphere (pp. 211-222; but see Crespi, 1989, pp. 93-130).

There are other important concerns too, but these five have attracted the most continuing attention. At a general level, the key question is whether public opinion processes in their natural operation are in fact democratic in the sense implied by earlier Enlightenment notions; in other words, whether "true" public opinion, or that which influences policy choices (Key, 1961), is in

reality shaped by an egalitarian, bottom-up communication of public concerns and ideas to policymakers. As we turn to our discussion of social scientific treatments of public opinion, we will see not only how public opinion researchers have approached their work conceptually but also how they have in various ways shed new light on these enduring questions.

Notes

1. Palmer's 1934 doctoral dissertation (summarized in Palmer, 1936) is a commonly cited analysis of the history of the concept of public opinion. Other useful historical treatments include Speier (1950), Minar (1960), Gunn (1983), Ozouf (1988), and Baker (1990). Book-length treatments are given in Noelle-Neumann (1984) and Habermas (1962/1989). Although less directly concerned with public opinion itself, works on democratic theory, such as those by Schumpeter (1943), Pateman (1970), Dahl (1956, 1971, 1985), and Held (1987, esp. pp. 13-143) are also of value in understanding the development of the concept.

2. The cultivation of individuality may introduce its own difficulties. One discussed by Lowell (1913) occurs when, after reasonable debate, the judgment of the majority is rejected entirely by an irreconcilable minority. A democracy requires, in Lowell's estimation, a balance between tolerance for minority viewpoints and acceptance of the will of the majority (see his discussion of the doctrine of the harmony of interests, pp. 28-29).

3. *Conceptualizing the Public*

Perhaps the most common conception of public opinion today equates it with a more or less straightforward aggregation of individual opinions, or "what opinion polls try to measure" (P. Converse, 1987, p. S13; Childs, 1939; Minar, 1960). When we compare this notion with those prevalent early in the 20th century, the contrast is striking. Earlier analysts were far more likely to frame public opinion as an inherently collective, supraindividual phenomenon or, as Cooley (1909) put it, "a cooperative product of communication and reciprocal influence" (p. 121). Although the rise of opinion polling would later tend to individualize the concept—bringing it closely in line with the majoritarian view discussed earlier—public opinion was commonly viewed in the early 1900s as a special kind of social-level product—not a collection of separate public opinions but instead the opinion of *a* public.

This tendency to conceive of public opinion in supraindividual terms was part and parcel of the age. Students of human social and psychological life at the turn of the 20th century, both in Europe and America (e.g., Tarde, 1890/1903; James, 1890; Baldwin, 1893; LeBon 1895/1960; Cooley, 1902, 1909) were clearly intrigued by prominent manifestations of collective behavior that typified the era: spontaneous crowds, strikes, mass demonstrations, and riots. Analysts were also fascinated by the role that the modern communication media—principally the press—appeared to play in shaping and guiding the "psychology of the masses." It was against a backdrop of general intellectual interest in phenomena such as mass and crowd behavior that the earliest attempts to provide a social-scientific treatment of public opinion appeared.

The aim of this chapter is to review these early and influential treatments of *the public*—conceptions that identified public opinion quite closely with collective behavior and focused mainly on explicating the sociological nature of the public as a transitory, loosely structured group (e.g., Park, 1904/1972; Blumer, 1946; Davison, 1958; Foote & Hart, 1953). Central to these treatments is the notion that public opinion can be viewed as part of a larger sociological process, as a mechanism through which stable societies adapt to changing circumstances via discussion and debate. Particular attention is also given to the concept of a public *issue*, especially to the way in which the public, as a developing social entity, theoretically forms itself over time through spontaneous argument, discussion, and collective opposition over an issue. For these reasons, subsequent writers have sometimes referred to this conceptualization of the public as a *discursive* model (Young, 1948; Bogardus, 1951; Price & Roberts, 1987; Price, 1988). Although the conceptual framework is now nearly a century old, it continues to inform, often indirectly, current thinking about public opinion across a variety of disciplines (in political science, for example, see Nimmo, 1978, pp. 238-240; Cobb & Elder, 1983, chs. 5, 6).

With its strong emphasis on public opinion as emergent from debate, this sociological formulation is in many respects a direct descendant of 18th-century Enlightenment ideas previously discussed. But the analytical framework propounded by Park (1904/

1972) and refined by Blumer (1946) represented an advancement in several important respects. It developed out of a general scientific interest in understanding human social relations, seeking to comprehend public opinion in light of its broader sociological significance.[1] More important, it fused previous political-philosophical ideas about public opinion (e.g., the notion that public opinion expresses the "general will") with modern social-psychological concerns, thus forming a bridge to later social scientific studies of attitudes and opinions (Chapter 4). The sociologically oriented discursive model continues to shed conceptual light on the ways in which public opinion is fundamentally *communicative* in nature (Price, 1988), and it gives us a vantage point for surveying the different entities that are variously equated with the public in contemporary public opinion research. The aim in the latter part of this chapter is to review, in light of these sociological conceptions of the public, the wide range of collective groupings—such as elites, issue publics, the attentive public, and the general public—that are commonly invoked in empirical opinion research. The goal is not to argue for or against any particular conception of the public (see Key, 1961) but simply to point out the ways in which researchers and analysts continue to employ a variety of collective-level concepts and operational definitions in describing and analyzing the public.[2]

Crowd, Public, and Mass

It is useful to bear in mind that sociological conceptions of the public originally developed in tandem with the new science of crowd psychology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Moscovici (1985) argues that the whole of modern social psychology can be traced to concerns raised during that period about the "massification" of society and its attendant ills: violent outbursts, mass panic, and other vivid indications of the "radical transformation" people could undergo in collective settings (p. 347). The puzzle to be solved was how otherwise-civil individuals could be transformed into angry mobs or enthusiastic demonstrators. That question was taken up by LeBon (1895/1960) in his influential book *La Psychologie des Foules* (*The Crowd*), in which he sought to lay the groundwork for a science of crowd psychology. Although the

concept of *the crowd* is rarely invoked today, it highlights and reflects some of the essential features of two contemporary collective concepts—*the mass* and *the public*.

The crowd. In arguing for the scientific study of crowds, LeBon (1895/1960) noted that the rise of the "popular classes" in political life was perhaps the most significant development in modern society (p. 9). He saw the crowd as one of the principal mechanisms by which these classes increasingly pressed their political claims, and with escalating destruction and violence. "The divine right of the masses," he observed, "is about to replace the divine right of kings" (p. 10). A scientific understanding of these crowds, and the ways in which they behave, would for this reason have to occupy a central place in the study of modern society.

LeBon's "law of the mental unity of crowds" drew heavily on psychological discoveries of the day, especially the ideas of hypnosis and unconscious suggestibility. He identified three basic causes of crowd behavior. First, the anonymity of being in a crowd loosens civil restrictions over people's baser instincts. Second, emotions and actions spread rapidly through spontaneous imitation and "contagion" (see also Tarde, 1890/1903). Third, and most important, the "conscious personality vanishes" under the influence of a crowd, and the individual becomes subject to unconscious persuasion and suggestibility—that is, essentially hypnotized by the collective will of the crowd (LeBon, 1895/1960, p. 27; Park, 1904/1972, p. 50). It is this hypnotic state that allows a crowd to act in unison, often with terrifying effect.

Later analysts of collective behavior did not necessarily share LeBon's fearful characterizations of life in the "era of crowds," and most abandoned his hypnotic conceptual framework. Yet they remained no less interested in loosely structured, crowdlike associations of people and the various social functions they serve (e.g., Blumer, 1946). As the field of collective behavior developed, it took under consideration not only crowds but also many kindred forms, such as fads, crazes, and social movements. Foote and Hart (1953) argued that various kinds of collective behavior, including crowdlike phenomena, could be centrally implicated in the formation of public opinion, particularly in its earliest stages. They suggested that analysts would profit from attention to those relatively undefined, exploratory, or tentative, collective processes out of which the more organized and rational modes of social action—such as public

debate—eventually emerge (p. 309). Still, many concepts from the field of collective behavior, as with the general idea of the crowd itself, have never been heavily used in studies of public opinion. Rather, the crowd has served principally as a kind of counterconcept against which the public is defined.

The public. The conceptual achievement of Park (1904/1972) was that he saw the crowd and the public as fundamentally similar in one key respect: Both are mechanisms for social adaptation and change—transitory social forms taken by social groups to "transform themselves" into new organizations. Moreover, the crowd and the public can both serve as initial routes to the creation of wholly new social entities, in other words, methods by which people from different established groups can organize into new ones (p. 79). Both the crowd and the public are dominated by a kind of collective force, or general will, Park proposed, but one that has not yet assumed the status of a clear social norm. Neither can thus be considered a society. The crowd and the public are not formally organized groups, but instead are "empirical preliminary stages" in the process of group formation (p. 80).

On the other hand, there are important conceptual differences between a crowd and a public. Park (1904/1972) suggested that the crowd is marked by unity of emotional experience (following LeBon), whereas the public is marked by opposition and rational discourse. The crowd develops in response to shared emotions; the public organizes in response to an issue. Entering the crowd requires only "the ability to feel and empathize," whereas joining the public requires also "the ability to think and reason with others." The behavior of the public could be guided at least partially by a shared emotional drive, but "when the public ceases to be critical, it dissolves or is transformed into a crowd" (p. 80).

The concept of the public as an elementary collective entity was given perhaps its most thorough conceptual treatment by Blumer (1946), who extended and clarified Park's earlier analysis. Blumer proposed that "the term *public* is used to refer to a group of people (a) who are confronted by an issue, (b) who are divided in their ideas as to how to meet the issue, and (c) who engage in discussion over the issue" (p. 189; see also Mills, 1956, p. 303-304, for a similar definition). Disagreement and discussion surrounding a particular issue bring a public into existence. A problem forces people to act collectively in response, but they lack traditions, norms, or rules

clearly dictating what kind of action should be taken. Like the crowd, the public is "lacking in the characteristic features of a society" (Blumer, 1946, p. 189), and its members do not have fixed status roles (recall the egalitarian notions prevalent in 18th-century thought). As Blumer put it, "the public is a kind of amorphous group whose size and membership varies with the issue; instead of having its activity prescribed, it is engaged in an effort to arrive at an act, and therefore is forced to *create* its action" (p. 190).

Thus, according to Blumer, argument and counterargument become the means by which public opinion is shaped (p. 191). For this argument to take place, a common language of fundamental terms, a "universe of discourse," is necessary. People and groups involved need to be able to take account of each other's positions and must be willing to compromise in order to determine an acceptable course of collective action (p. 191). Yet Blumer was quick to note that public debate may range from "highly emotional and prejudiced" to "highly intelligent and thoughtful" (p. 192). Following Lippmann (1925), he suggested that the public is ordinarily made up of interest groups on the one hand, which have an immediate concern with the way the issue is resolved and which participate quite actively in pursuing their aims, and "a more detached and spectator-like body" on the other. It is the eventual alignment of the less-interested (but not *un*interested) members of the public that ultimately determines which of the competing views will predominate. In their efforts to gain support, interest groups may partially subvert rational discourse by attempting to arouse emotions or by providing misinformation. Nonetheless, in Blumer's (1946) view, "the very process of controversial discussion forces a certain amount of rational consideration," which helps to ensure a more or less rational outcome. So "public opinion is rational, but need not be intelligent" (p. 192).

The mass. Like Park before him, Blumer (1946) noted that under conditions of common emotional excitement, the public could be transformed into a crowd, thus producing "public sentiment" rather than public opinion. Yet he argued that in modern times, the danger that the public would become a crowd is less worrisome than the danger that it would be "displaced by the mass" (Blumer, 1946, p. 196). A third elementary collective grouping, the mass, is distinguished in several important ways from both the crowd and the public. The mass is composed of anonymous individuals and

is marked by very little interaction or communication among its members. It is extremely heterogeneous, including people from all strata of society and "all walks of life" (Blumer, 1946, p. 185). The mass is widely dispersed geographically. It is more loosely organized than either the crowd or the public, and its members are unable to act in concert.

What binds together the mass is neither shared emotion (as in a crowd) nor disagreement and discussion (as in a public) but instead a common focus of interest or attention, one that takes people beyond the bounds of their parochial experience. "The object of mass interest," Blumer (1946) suggested, "can be thought of as attracting the attention of people away from their local cultures and spheres of life and turning it toward a wider universe, toward areas which are not defined or covered by rules, regulations, or expectations" (p. 186). This shared attention is the only common link among members of the mass; they do not act under the guidance of any sort of collective will. Being unable (or unwilling) to communicate with one another except in the most limited ways, they are left to act separately. The mass "merely consists of an aggregation of individuals who are separate, detached, anonymous," and who act in response to their own needs (pp. 186-187). Blumer offered several examples of masses in contemporary life: those "who are excited by some national event, those who share in a land boom, those who are interested in a murder trial which is reported in the press, or those who participate in some large migration" (p. 185).

Blumer also suggested that mass behavior was becoming increasingly significant in modern urban and industrial life as increased mobility, the mass media, and education all "have operated to detach individuals from customary moorings and thrust them into a wider world" (p. 187; Kornhauser, 1959; Escarpit, 1977). Worse, he saw the public as being gradually overtaken by the mass: "the increasing detachment of people from local life, the multiplicity of public issues, the expansion of agencies of mass communication, together with other factors, have led people to act increasingly by individual selection rather than by participating in public discussion" (p. 196). As a result the public and the mass, Blumer suspected, would become increasingly intermingled and hard to differentiate.

Blumer's concern was elaborated by Mills (1956), who argued that the mass had indeed supplanted the public in American political life. Echoing the "discursive" view of the public, Mills noted that the channels of communication within a true public are open and responsive, allowing as many people to express opinions as to receive them. Drawing on the Enlightenment notion of sovereignty in the formation of the public (Chapter 2), he argued that authoritative institutions of society do not penetrate the public, which is "thus more or less autonomous in its operation" (p. 304). Sadly, in Mills's estimation, modern conditions appeared far more favorable to mass rather than public opinion, for four basic reasons:

> In a mass, (1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. (2) The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. (3) The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action. (4) The mass has no authority from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion. (p. 304)

Thus, by Mills's reckoning, there is little true public discussion in modern political life, and whatever discussion does occur cannot properly be considered sovereign in the sense that its "universe of discourse," to use Blumer's expression, has been largely circumscribed by the media. Other researchers have taken a far more optimistic view of public communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), but the basic conceptual distinction between the mass and the public remains widely shared (see Graber, 1982).

Issues and Publics

The sociological conception of the public views it as a loosely organized collectivity that arises in the course of discussion surrounding an issue. In contrast to the mass, which stems solely from common attention to some matter and which is marked by

idiosyncratic responses formed outside of any debate or discussion, the public is marked by collective resolution of some problem through argument and counterargument. One major implication of this conception, already evident in the observations of Blumer (1946) and Mills (1956), is that discursive publics represent only a small portion of the modern electorate (Almond, 1950; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Rosenau, 1961; Key, 1961; Devine, 1970; Neuman, 1986). Another central implication is that a public is not a fixed entity. It changes in both size and composition as an issue is first recognized, moves through disputation, and is eventually resolved (Blumer, 1946, 1948; Price & Roberts, 1987).

Phases of development. The discursive model formulated by Park and Blumer is essentially developmental in nature, maintaining that public opinion is formed through a sequence of stages (Bryce, 1888; Foote & Hart, 1953; Davison, 1958).[3] Along these lines, Foote and Hart (1953) identify five collective phases in the formation of public opinion. First is the *problem phase*, wherein some situation is determined to be problematic by a particular person or group and over time becomes generally understood as such. During this early stage, a lack of definition surrounds both the problem and its consequences, and for this reason the relevant public is indeterminate. As Foote and Hart suggest, "public and problem emerge together in the course of interaction" (p. 312). Such interaction is inchoate and tentative at this point, because "people often do not know what they want in a situation" (p. 317). By the end of the initial phase, however, a problem has crystallized into a recognized issue, and the people involved—the public for this issue—have some understanding of what they want. But they may still not know quite the best way to obtain it. Thus comes the second stage, the *proposal phase*, in which one or more potential lines of action are formulated for responding to the problem. Again, considerable ambiguity may surround the process, because many ideas are raised and discarded. Although more clearly discursive than the first stage, the proposal phase still involves "some of the characteristics of collective behavior: groping movements, ephemeral emotions, sporadic waves of rumor and influence, disorganized clamor" (p. 313). To this point in the process, according to Foote and Hart, members of the public are collectively feeling out the dimensions of a problem and determining one or more ways to resolve it.

Next comes the *policy phase*, the stage during which the merits and weaknesses of alternative proposals, having now been determined, are actively debated. This is the phase most clearly identifiable as public discourse, when the most active members of the public recruit support from those less involved, trying to build a consensus for their proposals. Pollsters actively monitor opinions on the issue during this phase, and editorials and letters in support or opposition to particular proposals appear in the media. The policy phase eventually culminates in a decision to undertake a particular plan of action, thus initiating the *program phase*, during which time the approved course of action is executed. Finally, there is a fifth stage—the *appraisal phase*, in which periodic reevaluations of the effectiveness of the policy are undertaken, particularly by those unconvinced minorities that formed during the course of public debate. Even if the policy is generally successful, Foote and Hart (1953) suggest, "people may find that what was sought was not what was wanted after all, or that success in satisfying previous wants has given rise to unanticipated new problems" (p. 318).

Actors and spectators. Throughout these phases of development, the public changes in size, growing from the few who may first recognize a problem to the many who eventually participate somehow in resolving it (Davison, 1958). The public also changes in composition, expanding from those most directly involved in defining the issue, framing proposals and debating their merits, to many others who simply follow the scene as it unfolds. Both Lippmann (1925) and Blumer (1946) saw the public as essentially bilevel in nature, composed of both active and relatively more passive elements. Lippmann spoke generally of *actors* and *spectators*. The actors are those people—whether public officials or concerned citizens—who attempt to influence directly the course of political affairs. They identify problems, propose solutions, and try to persuade others to their view. The spectators, on the other hand, comprise an *audience* for the actors by following their actions with varying degrees of interest and activity (Dewey, 1927; Almond, 1950; Schattschneider, 1960). But the distinction between actors and spectators within the public is not hard and fast, and "there is often a mixture of the two types of behavior" (Lippmann, 1925, p. 110).[4] Moreover, the memberships of these two rough strata change with each issue. As Lippmann put it, "the actors in

one affair are the spectators of another, and men are continually passing back and forth" (p. 110).

Although difficult to define with precise boundaries, the distinction between actors and spectators is nonetheless important to analysts of public opinion. Public issues emerge largely from the reciprocal actions of these two elements. When we speak of public issues, we refer generally to those matters of conflict among the actors (groups or individuals, inside or outside the government) that have succeeded in gaining a wider audience of spectators. Issues may originate with small groups of people who disagree over some matter or who are pressing for change, but a problem or disagreement does not become a widespread concern—a public issue—until it gains the interest and attention of the larger group (Davison, 1958; Lang & Lang, 1983; Taylor, 1986).

Expanding public debate. Success in gaining a wider audience occurs partly, and perhaps primarily, because of concerted efforts by actors to publicize their conflicts and disagreements. Numerous analysts have noted that politics consists largely of the creation and suppression of issues—the recruitment of publics for particular problems, or the definition of problems in such a manner that publics fail to form around them (Cobb & Elder, 1983, ch. 5; Taylor, 1986). As Schattschneider (1960) points out, "what happens in politics depends upon the way in which people are divided into factions, parties, groups, classes, etc." (p. 62). Along these lines, recent experimental research suggests that altering media images of which social groups make up the opposing sides on an issue can produce differences in the way audiences respond (Price, 1989). Actors expend considerable energy trying to frame the conflict in a way that best serves their interests.

On the other hand, issues do not arise solely due to the efforts of actors. "Millions of attempts are made," Schattschneider (1960) observes, "but an issue is produced only when the battle is joined" (p. 74). Why do some issues succeed in finding a wide audience, whereas others do not? Possible lines of political cleavage within the electorate are numerous, and according to Schattschneider, the *constellation* of possible cleavages helps to determine whether a particular problem eventually arouses and divides the electorate. Many potential conflicts in the community fail to develop into issues because they are blotted out by stronger antagonisms (p. 68), but other issues are "able to relate themselves easily to clusters of

parallel cleavages in same general dimension" (p. 74). Characteristics of an issue itself, such as its complexity, social significance, or long-term implications, can also affect the likelihood that it will expand from the circle of those immediately concerned to a wider public (Cobb & Elder, 1983). To some extent, these issue characteristics can be manipulated in the course of public debate. The key to political success, Schattschneider argues, lies in the ways the actors define a problem and alternative courses of action (1960, pp. 67-70). The earliest stages of public opinion formation—the problem phase and the proposal phase—principally determine which cleavages in the electorate will be activated and thus how large and how deeply divided the public becomes during the policy phase.

After an issue is resolved. At the conclusion of the policy phase, once an issue is debated and decided, its public theoretically recedes due to attrition and reduced communication. But the associations, alignments, and cleavages formed through public response to a particular problem persist; the highly active and organized elements of publics, once formed, can function for long periods of time, eventually taking on quasi-institutional status (e.g., interest groups, such as the American Association of Retired People, or the National Rifle Association). The public remnants of one issue thus form the raw material for new issues and new publics. Out of the process of dealing publicly with a succession of issues, political parties and other highly organized interest groups—with the doctrines and ideologies they represent—come into existence. These relatively stable groups and organizations form a slowly changing background against which the rise and fall of particular issues and their publics is played out. As Park (1904/1972) suggested, publics allow these stable groups to adapt and change, just as they enable new colective associations to be formed.

Observing the Public

The public is a difficult entity to identify precisely. It is loosely organized through communication surrounding an issue, it includes both active and passive strata, it changes in size and shape as it develops, and it passes into and out of existence along with an issue. It is no small wonder that general statements about the

nature of *the* public are problematic. As Key (1961) points out, "on one issue the public may consist of one sector of the population; on another, of a quite different sector. Not much overlap would be expected between those deeply interested in policy toward upland game and those concerned about practices in the licensing of plumbers" (p. 15). How to identify such vastly different publics across wide-ranging issues thus becomes a challenge of paramount importance for public opinion research.

In trying to answer that challenge, the earliest researchers to tackle systematic empirical study of public opinion (e.g., Allport, 1937) ended up discarding many of the central notions of the discursive model.[5] Wedded as it is to the concept of the public as a changing, amorphous entity, the sociological model proved ill-suited to any simple means of empirical description (P. Converse, 1987). As survey research and opinion polling got underway in the 1930s, the daunting task of empirically observing the public as a fluid and complexly structured group, in a way consistent with the sociological model, led to its replacement with a far more tractable approach—essentially an aggregate "one person, one vote" conception, a formulation consistent both with the majoritarian notions of public opinion (Chapter 2) and with populist democratic ideals (see Gallup & Rae, 1940).

The simpler aggregate model was certainly more practical. Although researchers have periodically objected to and resisted this shift of conceptualization (most notably Blumer himself in 1948), there is little doubt that it enabled researchers to begin systematic, empirical analyses of opinions and attitudes in the general population (Chapter 4). But the change in perpective was consequential. The advent of opinion polling and suvey research redirected attention toward social-psychological as opposed to broadly sociological concerns, and it placed problems of individual-level opinion measurement at the center of the field. As Bogart (1972) observed, "the world of public opinion in today's sense really began with the Gallup Polls of the mid-1930s, and it is impossible for us to retreat to the meaning of public opinion as it was understood by Thomas Jefferson in the eighteenth century, by Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord Bryce in the nineteenth,—or even Walter Lippmann in 1922" (p. 14).

Is it, though, "impossible to retreat" as Bogart says? In many ways the sociological model of the public, although eclipsed by later aggregate notions with the advent of polling, was never entirely abandoned. Although it is true that we are today likely to understand public opinion as what "polls try to measure," serious students of the phenomenon (including those who were instrumental in the advancement of survey techniques) have continued to puzzle over the kinds of collective processes analyzed by Park, Blumer, and others (see, e.g., Berelson, 1950; Stouffer, 1955). Contemporary students of public opinion are not, merely by adopting the survey method, necessarily forced to regard public opinion as an aggregate of "equally weighted opinions of disparate individuals" (cf. Blumer, 1948). The technology of opinion polling has indeed contributed to such a conception, but it does not perforce demand that analysts apply any particular conceptual model to the poll data collected. There is the option of constructing some other measure of public opinion, for example, by drawing on select groups within the total sample or by differentially weighting according to salience, involvement, or active participation (see Schuman & Presser, 1981, ch. 9). Or if one believes that certain collective aspects of public opinion cannot be observed at all by measurement of constituent individuals, other techniques such as content analysis might be employed (Chapter 5). To say that the ascendancy of polling helped to establish aggregate conceptions of public opinion is to say nothing about the inherent suitability of survey techniques as a mode of observation, only something about the typical way of interpreting such observations. As we shall see below, not all researchers—or even pollsters—adhere strictly to a one person, one vote model.

The truth of the matter is that analysts of "the public" today may equate it, across different research situations, with very different collectivities. Some equate it with those people and groups who participate actively in public debate on a particular issue; others may consider the public more generally as that sector of the population that appears informed about or attentive to public affairs in general; still others may equate the public broadly with the electorate or even more widely with the population as a whole.[6]

The general public. One prevalent conception of the public is that it corresponds with a given population in its entirety. In the inaugural issue of the field's flagship journal, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Allport (1937) presented an influential outline for future public opinion research. He argued that any concept of the public that is not

totally inclusive—which does not include *each* individual in a given population—is too ambiguous. Allport conceptualized the public as a population defined by geographical, community, political jurisdiction, or other limits. As he put it, "opinions are reactions of individuals; they cannot be allocated to publics without becoming ambiguous and unintelligible for research" (p. 9). Allport's identification of the public with the entire population became well established in research circles and can readily be seen as the notion underlying most current polling practices (see also Childs, 1939, 1965).[7] Philip Converse (1987) notes that the willing adoption of this conception of the public was due not merely to its practicality. The pioneers of opinion polling and survey research at work in the 1930s—George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley, among others—"were strong on democratic principles and pleased to provide a means that the voice of the people might be more clearly heard" by those in power (P. Converse, 1987, p. S15). The commitment to viewing the public as inclusive of all members of society was a populist, democratic decision.

But the "general public," when equated with the general population, is clearly not a public in the more traditional sense of the term. Fifty years of survey research has pretty much overwhelmingly confirmed the early suspicions of Bryce (1888) and Lippmann (1922) that the bulk of the general population is both uninterested and uninformed on most matters that could be construed as public affairs (see, e.g., Erksine, 1962, 1963; Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press [Times Mirror], 1990). Key found in 1961 that nearly 10% pay no attention at all to even highly visible presidential campaigns. Voter turnout in presidential elections is now close to 50%. Neuman (1986) concludes that roughly 66% of the American population has little or no interest in politics (p. 10; Kinder and Sears, 1985). By some estimates, as many as 33% of the opinions gathered in general population surveys may be merely "top of the head" responses, offered without the benefit of any previous thought or discussion (Bishop, Oldendick, Tuchfarber, & Bennett, 1980; Graber, 1982; Neuman, 1986). It is consequently hard to accept the entire population as a group engaged in thoughtful consideration or discussion of most issues. The views given to pollsters are often unorganized, disconnected, individual responses, formed outside the arena of public debate. In other words, they are *mass* opinions. As Crespi (1989) puts it, "by treating public opinion as the sum of

the opinions of the *individuals* who make up the electorate, rather than as a force that emerges from organized society, pollsters implicitly, if not explicitly, define their task as the measurement of public opinion in mass society" (p. 11).[8]

This is not to say that opinions gathered from the general public are in any sense meaningless or that they are inconsequential to the resolution of public issues. Even unreflective pseudo-opinions, although clearly not sound public opinions benefiting from extended consideration or debate, can be meaningful efforts to respond to survey questions (Bishop et al., 1980; Schuman & Presser, 1981). Furthermore, the mere fact that opinion polling has become an institutional player in the political realm (Sabato, 1981) has likely given mass opinion increasing clout in shaping policy. Although mass opinion is acknowledged to be shallow on many issues and has been observed to depart widely from effective public opinion in some cases (e.g., the issue of gun control; see Schuman & Presser, 1981), the population as a whole continues to be equated with the public in many treatments.

The voting public. Another entity commonly identified with the public is the *electorate*—still a massive and relatively undifferentiated collective but one that represents at best 70% of the American population and in some cases (e.g., in municipal elections) an even smaller portion. Directly in line with representative democratic theory (Chapter 2), the electorate is one of the most common operational definitions of the public, and election outcomes are perhaps the most visible instances of public opinion in American society.

Given variability in voter turnout across elections, however, the problem of identifying that sector of the general population most likely to vote in a particular case presents difficulties for pollsters—a simplified instance of the larger problem inherent in empirically locating variable publics, as conceived of in the sociological model, across different issues. Indeed, the ability of opinion polls to predict election results has for a long time been taken as an indication of their general validity. Were turnout uniformly high, probability samples of the general population would do quite well. But a recognized source of error in predicting election outcomes is low voter turnout (Crespi, 1989; Cantril, 1991). Because many respondents to mass surveys are unlikely to vote, pollsters sometimes attempt to screen out nonvoters when casting their projections. Statistical techniques for adjusting preelection survey estimates to

account for the likelihood of voting have been developed (e.g., Traugott & Tucker, 1984), but these have so far been adopted by few polling organizations (Crespi, 1989).

No doubt the act of voting is a clear, behavioral expression of opinion, and may even be treated as a form of participation in public debate (albeit one constrained by the particular electoral alternatives offered). However, the fact that a person has voted in an election should by no means be taken as an indication that he or she has actively engaged in considering the issues at stake. Research indicates that many voters go to the polls without much information to guide their selections. "The picture of uninformed voters in the election booth staring vainly at their shoes in search of cues to help them in their vote decision is in all likelihood not a hyperbole" (Neuman, 1986, p. 173). Or as Key (1961) put it, "a substantial proportion of the citizenry . . . may 'care' about how elections come out, and may have an 'interest' in campaigns. This involvement tends to carry with it some sense of sharing in the political process. . . . Yet the activities associated with this sense of involvement are of a different order from those of the highly attentive publics whose members may be especially well informed and fairly closely in touch with political processes" (p. 547).

The attentive public. Out of the 70% or so of the general population that votes at least occasionally, only about 50% are generally attentive to public affairs (e.g., Devine, 1970). In recognition of the fact that the electorate includes many who are generally u uninvolved and inactive politically, Almond (1950) argued that it is necessary to look to a much smaller body of citizens for realistic answers to questions about how public opinion shapes actual policy. In his analysis of foreign policy formation, he identified a group he called the *attentive public*, "which is informed and interested in foreign policy problems, and which constitutes the audience for foreign policy elites" (p. 138). More generally, Key (1961) posited that a small number of citizens in the broader population will tend to "manifest a high interest in campaigns and also maintain a continuing interest in the flow of action between campaigns" (p. 544). As Devine (1970, p. 34) summarized it, "the attentive public is conceived as the relevant public for the American political system." It is this group that pays continuing attention to political affairs, engages thoughtfully in public issues, and occasionally

talks about those issues with others. These are the spectators of whom Lippmann (1925) wrote.

Research on attention to political news confirms the view that there is a reasonably stable stratum of the population that pays attention to public affairs. Certainly for different kinds of stories the attentive audience varies in size, but for standard political news, attention groups are rather small (e.g., Robinson and Levy, 1986; Times Mirror, 1990). Price and Zaller (1990) analyzed patterns in news awareness across 16 different news stories of widely varying types (from items about international politics to news about the trials of televangelist Jim Bakker and the actress Zsa Zsa Gabor). The strongest and most consistent predictor of awareness, even for nonpolitical stories, turned out to be a global measure of background political knowledge. Knowledge about and attention to public affairs seem to go hand in hand, and the population appears to be well stratified along this information/attention continuum (Neuman, 1986; Price & Zaller, 1990).

How do researchers identify the attentive public as a group? Devine (1970) used five survey measures: reported interest in politics generally, interest in national election campaigns, talking about politics, exposure to newspaper news about politics, and reading about politics in magazines. On this basis, he classified about a third of the total population as generally attentive (p. 55; see also Kingdon, 1970). Devine found that the group was fairly heterogeneous, although as might be expected, socioeconomic variables are clearly correlated with membership in the attentive public. Members of this group are far more active than others in public debate, they are more likely to join demonstrations or wear campaign buttons, and they are 10 times more likely than others to write public officials (Devine, 1970, p. 119). Given this, we might expect that a perusal of letters to the editor would turn up a disproportionate number from members of the attentive public. Still it is principally by its attention to political affairs, rather than by its activity, that this group is distinguished.

The active public. One step up the ladder of public interest and activity is a much smaller group that may be called the *active public*, which may amount to about 15% of the attentive public (see Neuman, 1986). Here we have the actors in Lippmann's (1925) conceptual scheme. As with the former distinctions between the

general public and the attentive public, however, the demarcation between the political activists and the more spectator-like public "must be regarded as a zone of gray rather than as a sharp line" (Key, 1961, p. 543). The engagement of this group in political affairs includes both formal means of political participation—monetary contributions, organizational memberships, and attendance at rallies, for example—as well as very active informal participation, such as public discussion and debate with others.

The term *elite* is used quite often to refer to these most active members of the population (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). For example, Key (1961) understands the political elite "in a broad sense to include political leaders, governmental functionaries, party activists, opinion makers, and others of that vaguely defined stratum of society who talk and act in political roles" (p. 259). This conception matches quite closely Lippmann's view of the actors. As Key puts it, "the political elite—the talkers, the persuaders, the advocates, the opponents—mediate between the world of remote and complex events and the mass of the public" (p. 261). Similarly, when Almond (1950) uses the term *elite*, he refers to "the articulate policy-bearing stratum of the population which gives structure to the public" (p. 138). Within this stratum, Almond singled out several different kinds of elites: the official policy leadership (the political elites), members of the professional corps who enjoy special powers because of their familiarity and contact with government (bureaucratic elites), those representatives of private, policy-oriented groups (interest elites), and the communications elites, which include not only those in the mass media but also effective opinion leaders who use interpersonal channels—clergy, club and fraternal order leaders, and so on (pp. 139-140). These members of the active public compete in the *opinion market* (that is, among the attentive public) for supporters and converts to their causes.

Analysts like Almond and Key generally equate elite opinion with effective opinion. The active public is most directly responsible for shaping governmental action. As Almond says, "one might almost say 'who mobilizes elites, mobilizes the public.' Such a formulation would at least be closer to the truth than some of the more ardent claims of democratic ideologues" (1950, p. 138). Because of their broad influence in many policy decisions, internal division and competition among elites are central to the functioning

of a democratic government (Dahl, 1961). The interpretation of empirical findings bearing on this issue, however, is debated (see Dahl, 1985). Although the upper classes do contribute disproportionately to the active public, there are still to be found political activists from all classes (Key, 1961; Boynton, Patterson & Hedlund, 1969; Neuman, 1986). Elite heterogeneity is crucial, because if elites become too cohesive as a group, this would effectively foreclose any opportunity for public choice. There must be, in other words, pluralism among the elites: a multiplicity of centers of power, with some autonomy and economic independence (Key, 1961, p. 540; but see Mills, 1956).

Issue publics. Characterizations of the attentive public and the active public suggest—and various empirical findings appear to confirm—the existence of general strata within the population, roughly delimited by increasing levels of interest, attention, and participation in political affairs across a range of issues (Neuman, 1986). But the sociological model of the public, we should recall, posits rather considerable flux in the size and composition of different publics for various problems. Certainly variability of voter turnout across elections lends some credence to the idea that public interest and activity rise and fall with different issues, and these fluctuations in the size of the public may go hand in hand with fluctuations in its organization. The notions of *issue publics* and *special publics* refer to this phenomenon (e.g., Almond, 1950). Differences across issues may extend to both spectators and actors; if so, we could speak separately of both active issue publics and attentive issue publics.

There does appear to be substantial variability across issues, for example, in the composition of the active or elite component of the public. References to "the elite stratum of society" may often obscure the fact that very different segments of the population can become actively engaged in trying to solve different problems. Organized groups clearly attach themselves to particular issues. Operation Rescue, for instance, exists in response to the abortion debate, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving was formed to deal with quite another problem. No doubt there are global tendencies for particular individuals to be generally active, or not, in politics. But substantial differences in the composition of the elite for any particular issue cannot be overlooked (Key, 1961).

It is less clear whether the attentive public is issue specific in a similar fashion. There does seem to be variability from one issue to the next in the composition and size of interested audiences. As Key (1961) argues, beyond the generally attentive public, with its interest in a range of political events, "there exists a complex population of special publics whose attentions center more or less continuously on specific governmental agencies or fields of policy" (p. 544). Membership in an attentive issue public would presumably be based partly on being well informed generally but also on special concern about a particular problem or set of issues. Different problems have consequences for different people, so publics may form naturally out of those groups most directly affected (Dewey, 1927). One striking example of this phenomenon was provided by Congressional debate in 1989 over possible repeal of the government's catastrophic health insurance program. People over the age of 64 were about 2 times as likely as others in the population to know about this debate. Yet among the elderly, there was also a very strong relationship between general knowledge of political affairs and awareness of the health insurance debate. About 75% of the best informed older persons were aware of the issue, whereas only 20% of those who were least well informed generally were aware of it (Price & Zaller, 1990).

Recent research by Krosnick (1990) also clearly indicates the varying importance of different political issues to different groups within the general population. Krosnick finds that although only small percentages of citizens attach high levels of importance to any particular issue, nearly half of the American population attaches great importance to at least one problem. Moreover, he finds only weak intercorrelations between importance measures across different issues, suggesting that there are indeed relatively discrete attentive publics, aroused by different problems. On the other hand, there is also evidence to support the view that the attentive public is relatively stable across issues. Early research on opinion leadership, for instance, found that being an opinion leader in one domain was related to being a leader in another domain as well (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Marcus & Bauer, 1964). The question of the general stability or the issue specificity of the attentive public is important conceptually, even though it is far from answered empirically. It would certainly affect the way one tries to deal pragmatically with public opinion, as for example in the design of political campaigns. A campaign may conceive of its target audience as the generally attentive public (as perhaps most campaigns do) or attempt a more issue-specific approach by appealing to those people who are particularly attentive to a given problem.

Our brief review thus points out several interesting observations. First, there is a relatively high degree of consistency between the sociological model of the public, as formulated in the early part of the 20th century, and the conceptual framework emerging from recent empirical investigations. The four major collective concepts commonly invoked in public opinion research—the general public, the electorate, the attentive public, and the elite or active public—correspond roughly to a continuum from mass to public. It is within the third group—the attentive public—that we find the intermingling of mass and public that Blumer (1946) predicted. Although we might usefully conceive of these as four general strata within the population, there is also some evidence that these groups—especially the active public—are often differently composed for different problems, just as the traditional model suggests.

A second observation is that each of these four collectivities—whether formally considered a public or not—can play a significant role in the formation of public opinion (see Lang & Lang, 1983). It is in this sense that a search for *the* public is likely to be in vain. Equating the public with any one of these groups may obscure the contribution of others to the process. Certainly members of the active public (e.g., interest groups and organized elites) enjoy disproportionate influence on policy and deserve more systematic attention in public opinion research (as argued for by Key [1961] and by Graber [1982]). But in turning attention to the actors, we should not overlook the role of the spectators, or as Bryce (1888) put it more than a century ago, "the reflex action of the passive upon the active class" (p. 11). It is in the *interaction* among these groups—as they form and change over time—that answers are likely to be found concerning the collective formation and impact of public opinion (Lang & Lang, 1983). Chapter 5 will consider this possibility in greater detail.

Notes

1. Analytical efforts like those of Park and Blumer figured prominently in the establishment of collective behavior as a vital subfield within American

sociology—one that developed largely independent of public opinion research (see Turner & Killian, 1957; Elsner, 1972).

2. Key (1961) similarly resists the temptation to argue for an overall definition of *the* public, preferring to remain satisfied that "on a given question the operative public may consist of a highly structured association, while on another matter opinions may be diffused through a wide public that lacks any special organization" (p. 15). But his appraisal of early sociological conceptions of the public is far less sanguine than that offered here. Key dismisses some of the central notions of the discursive model (e.g., that a public forms and organizes through discussion surrounding particular issues, citing Davison [1958]) as being organismic in nature and of "more poetic than practical utility" (pp. 8-9). He generally disparages efforts to conceptualize the public as "any sort of loosely structured association or other ghostly sociological entity" (p. 15).

3. Even before the turn of the century, Bryce (1888, pp. 2-5) described the formation of public opinion as proceeding through a sequence of stages remarkably similar to those later identified by sociologists such as Foote and Hart (1953) and Davison (1958). More recently, analysts in a variety of fields have proposed stages of development in public opinion that are roughly comparable with those of Foote and Hart (1953) described here. See, for example, Downs (1972), Nimmo (1978, pp. 238-240), and VanLeuven and Slater (1991).

4. Following Blumer's terminology, we could say that the behavior of the public is, at the more active end of the spectrum, truly public (in the discursive sense) and at the other end of the spectrum more comparable with mass behavior (see the discussion of elite-mass relationships, below).

5. Allport (1937) dismissed in general the discursive conception of public opinion—not as an absolute fiction but as a blind alley for research nonetheless. Under such a model, he noted, public opinion "is regarded as a new product emerging from integrated discussion in a group, a product of concerted individual thinking which is both different from the average or consensus of views and from the opinion of any individual" (p. 10). Allport's rejection of the discursive model stemmed from several concerns. First, the focus on emergent products of group interaction seemed to invite the fallacy of removing thought from the minds of individuals. Second, and perhaps more important, these emergent products were not easily identified for empirical analysis. "We are merely saying that, if there is such an emergent product, we do not know where it is, how it can be discovered, identified or tested, or what the standards are by which its value may be judged" (p. 11). But he expresses some ambivalence. Later, for example, Allport speaks of the transitory aspects of public opinion in terms quite like those propounded in the discursive model (pp. 16-18). And in an extensive footnote, he discusses possible collective alignments as forces within the public, acknowledging that if these forces do indeed exist then "a formulation we have rejected as sterile becomes valid, and even necessary, as a working principle of research" (pp. 21-22).

6. The organization of this discussion owes in part to useful ideas contributed by Steven Chaffee.

7. In practice, the entire population is rarely sampled. It is always delimited in some way, for example, by sampling only those of age 18 or older, by excluding people without homes or those residing in institutions, or by including only people with telephones.

8. On the other hand, polling allows us to estimate how many people hold no opinion on an issue, which is by no means a trivial piece of information (Chapter 4).

4. *Conceptualizing Opinions*

The 1930s represented a significant turning point in thinking about public opinion, marked by a general shift away from viewing it as a supraindividual, collective phenomenon (e.g., Cooley, 1909) toward a more individualistic perspective that treats it as an aggregation of opinions within some designated population (e.g., Childs, 1939). This shift in focus was brought about mainly by two important and interrelated methodological advancements—developments that profoundly shaped not only public opinion research but the whole of American social science. The first was the growth of psychological measurement, in particular the development of quantitative techniques for the scaling of attitudes (e.g., Thurstone, 1928; Thurstone & Chave, 1929; Likert, 1931). The availability of such techniques allowed researchers interested in opinions and attitudes (often treated as essentially the same things) to begin systematic empirical investigations of their properties, determinants, and relationships to behavior.

A second key development was the application of scientific sampling theory to social research, both in academic and applied settings. Social surveys had already been used before this time, principally for gathering objective data such as information concerning economic conditions in different localities (Fleming, 1967, p. 344; J. Converse, 1987). In the late 1920s and 1930s, researchers, equipped with new devices for measuring attitudes and opinions, embarked on the sampling of subjective phenomena as well (e.g., Lynd & Lynd, 1929). It was the use of scientifically designed sampling techniques—although rather crude by today's standards—that allowed Gallup, Crossley, and Roper to predict with some accuracy the outcome of the 1936 presidential election based on relatively few interviews, whereas immense but haphazard "straw polls" conducted by many newspapers and magazines of the day, most notably the prestigious *Literary Digest*, badly missed the mark (Crossley, 1937).

The combination of advances in measurement and sampling placed researchers in a position to study opinions and attitudes in large populations and also to gather what were increasingly believed

to be very accurate readings of public opinion on matters of political and social significance. By the early 1940s, major survey research centers had been established in universities, government bureaus, and private industry (J. Converse, 1987; Sudman & Bradburn, 1987). *Public Opinion Quarterly* was first published in 1937, and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) was established 10 years later. Both became key outlets for the exchange of quantitative research findings from opinion and attitude studies and survey research (Davison, 1987).

Since the field's inception, public opinion research has placed great emphasis on questions concerning how to conceptualize individual opinions (Allport, 1937; Riesman & Glazer, 1948; Wiebe, 1953) and how to measure them accurately (Cantril, 1944; Lazarsfeld, 1944; Payne, 1951; Sudman & Bradburn, 1974; Schuman & Presser, 1981). In this chapter, I discuss each of these two broad questions in turn, beginning with a review of the concept's early adaptation to research. In particular, I focus on the close conceptual kinship that opinion shares with attitude.

Opinions and Attitudes

The history of public opinion research is probably inseparable from the history of attitude research. In fact, the two terms are often used interchangeably (see Berelson & Steiner, 1964, p. 557; McGuire, 1985). Doob (1948) directly equated opinions and attitudes in his definition of public opinion: "it refers to people's attitudes on an issue when they are members of the same social group" (p. 35). Childs (1965) described an opinion as "an expression of attitude in words" (p. 13).[1]

Although these terms tend to be used interchangeably, they occupy somewhat different conceptual niches. Opinions and attitudes are often contrasted in the literature and have been said to differ conceptually in at least three ways. First, opinions have usually been considered as observable, verbal responses to an issue or question, whereas an attitude is a covert, psychological predisposition or tendency. Second, although both attitude and opinion imply approval or disapproval, the term *attitude* points more toward affect (i.e., fundamental liking or disliking), opinion more heavily toward cognition (e.g., a conscious decision to support or

oppose some policy, politician, or political group). Third, and perhaps most important, an attitude is traditionally conceptualized as a global, enduring orientation toward a general class of stimuli, but an opinion is viewed more situationally, as pertaining to a specific issue in a particular behavioral setting.

Opinions as expressions. Fleming (1967) credits Thurstone (1928) with being among the first to draw a precise conceptual distinction between attitude and opinion. In dealing with the problem of measuring attitudes, Thurstone noted that they are never directly accessible to the researcher. They must be inferred from verbalized "opinions" or otherwise overt behavior. Thurstone conceived of an attitude as a latent readiness to respond to a situation in a given way and an opinion as the response itself. Opinions were, in short, manifest indicators of unobserved attitudes.

Thurstone's way of distinguishing opinions from attitudes was more methodological than substantive, and as Fleming (1967) notes, "Thurstone himself repeatedly ignored the distinction that he had drawn between them, and he instinctively spoke of 'attitude' when his own precepts required 'opinion'" (p. 348). Nevertheless, explicit statements restricting the definition of opinion along these lines soon appeared in the literature: opinions had to be *verbalized* or otherwise expressed statements of support or opposition for some action (Allport, 1937; Childs, 1939).

Despite this refinement in meaning, the opinion concept continued to be applied in a manner more or less consistent with attitude, referring to internal psychological states as well as behaviors. For example, even though Allport (1937) insisted that opinions had to be expressed, he suggested that the analyst of public opinion could not neglect opinions that people might hold but *not* express (p. 15). This clearly implied that opinions can be covert mental judgments as well as overt behaviors. Indeed, in spite of a definitional commitment to opinions as overt expressions, analysts of public opinion continue to speak of unexpressed, private, internal, and latent opinions as well (e.g., Doob, 1948; Lane & Sears, 1964; see Hennessey, 1985, pp. 11-12). The distinction has some theoretical import, because it is often argued that only expressed or "public" opinions can have political force (Allport, 1937, p. 20). To be effective, opinions must be expressed. But here too the boundaries can sometimes blur. As Key (1961) noted, "governments may (and often do) give weight to latent opinion; in advance of action, they

need to estimate the kinds of opinions that may be expressed if a given course is followed or proposed" (p. 17; see also Allport, 1937, p. 15). Although the literature on defining public opinion often formally commits to a definition of opinions as verbalized expressions, we must admit that in practice researchers commonly operate with a much less restrictive view.

Opinions as thoughtful. Thurstone's (1928) initial distinction along manifest-latent lines was not alone responsible for the eventual carving out of separate conceptual niches for opinion and attitude. Just as important was the fact that opinion is viewed as a conscious judgment, seen generally as more "ratiocinative" and less affective in its makeup than an attitude (Fleming, 1967, p. 361). One *decides* an opinion, whereas an attitude is not generally understood as being consciously figured out or decided in quite the same way. Instead an attitude is *felt* as an affective impulse, an inclination to respond positively or negatively to something.

Here the connection between opinion and reasoned debate that was established during the Enlightenment shows its persistence. Even if one does not maintain that opinions need to be worked out through discussion (which would make them public opinions in the traditional sense), there remains a tendency to treat them as more thoughtful than attitudes. Stated in the simplest terms, opinions are judgments and attitudes are the raw "likes and dislikes" (Bem, 1970) that feed into those judgments.

Again, it must be admitted that the distinction is not particularly firm. Analysts are often reluctant to accord too much calculation and thoughtfulness to opinions, which sometimes seem to reflect intense feeling rather than cool deliberation. As we noted in Chapter 2, the term opinion carried with it, even in its earliest uses, nonrational and affective as well as rational connotations, especially so when applied to collectivities like the "common people." Furthermore, psychologists have traditionally conceptualized attitudes as both cognitive and affective in composition; with the recent ascendancy of the cognitive perspective in social psychology, this trend has been even more pronounced (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). So although attitude and opinion are thought to differ in terms of their relative balance of affect versus cognition, neither term is identified entirely with one extreme or the other.

Opinions as adaptations of attitudes to specific issues. A third general distinction between attitudes and opinions—one that sums up in various ways both themes above—sees attitudes as part of the raw materials, or building blocks, that form opinions. Fleming (1967) contends that the choice made by pollsters like Gallup and Roper to use the term public opinion in reference to their poll results (rather than public attitudes or political attitudes) helped put some conceptual distance between attitude and opinion. Here the traditional association between public opinion and government found its natural expression (Chapter 2). The upshot was that Thurstone's initial manifest-latent distinction was pushed an important step further. Once it was adopted for use by pollsters, *opinion* became the commonly accepted term for an expressed pro or con position on a political issue. Opinions were thus the immediate behavioral phenomena to be explained (issue positions), whereas the term *attitude* was reserved for reference to the deeper, underlying motives for those behaviors (Fleming, 1967 p. 349). Opinions were no longer just stand-in measures of attitudes; they were conceptually distinct products of attitudes.

Very little conscious effort was made to distinguish the two concepts precisely along these lines, however, until Wiebe (1953) attempted to spell out their relationship in detail. In his formulation, an attitude represents a structural predisposition—an enduring orientation to respond to something favorably or unfavorably. An opinion, on the other hand, is consciously worked out in response to a particular question in a specific situation—it is "a decision which adapts attitudes related to the issue to the individual's perception of the reality in which the behavior must transpire" (p. 333). Consequently, opinions and attitudes may well diverge, particularly when a problem brings two or more potentially conflicting attitudes into play.[2] As Wiebe saw the relationship, an attitude is an immediate, intuitive orientation and an opinion is a thought-out choice between specific alternatives made in a particular social setting (see also Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953).

Inferring Psychological Bases for Opinions

As the foregoing suggests, use of the term opinion is variable. Sometimes it refers to a behavioral and at other times a psychological phenomenon. At the immediate, or surface level, we may

speak of *overt opinions*, which are expressed judgments about particular actions or proposed actions of collective concern, made in specific behavioral settings.[3] These are the central data collected in public opinion research, for which the behavioral setting is a survey interview. Clearly, however, opinions can also be expressed in informal discussions, letters written to public officials or newspaper editors, the casting of votes, participation in demonstrations, labor strikes, and so on. We may separately speak of *covert opinions*, which are judgments formed in the mind about particular actions or proposed actions of collective concern. Although these kinds of opinions are often inferred from survey responses, we will discuss shortly a few reasons why such an interpretation is not quite as uncomplicated as it might first appear. Like expressed opinions, these covert judgments are conceptualized as responses to specific issues, that is, as pertaining to particular policies regarding some shared problem. More global than either expressed opinions or covert opinions are *attitudes*, which, following Wiebe's (1958) conceptualization, are inferred as enduring predispositions to respond positively or negatively to a general class of stimuli.

Expressed opinions, covert judgments, and attitudes may be related, but there are important reasons why they deserve to be distinguished conceptually. First, people can express opinions that differ markedly from the views they maintain privately, especially when they are exposed to social pressure (Asch, 1951). For example, in recent American elections in which black candidates have run for office against white opponents, opinion polls have exhibited considerable shifting in the balance of reported candidate support, depending on the race of the survey interviewer (Edelman & Mitofsky, 1990). White respondents interviewed by blacks are more likely to say they support the black candidate than are white respondents interviewed by other whites (Keeter, 1990; Finkel, Guterbock, & Borg, 1991). When opposition is expected, some people may alter their expressed position or refrain from giving their opinions at all, in spite of having clearly formed viewpoints or strong attitudes (Noelle-Neumann, 1979, 1984).

Beyond the problem of potential mismatches between expressed opinions and covert viewpoints, there is an even more fundamental problem. A person need not have developed *any* underlying judgment or preference—much less maintain an enduring predisposition to behave toward a class of objects—to express an opinion. Research has clearly illustrated that people are willing to offer opinions on matters even when no covert judgments or attitudes bearing on them seem to exist. That is, as noted in Chapter 3, survey respondents sometimes provide interviewers with snap judgments or pseudo-opinions.

Converse (1964, 1970) found that most survey respondents' opinions are extremely unstable. Instead of giving the same responses to the same opinion questions in 1956, 1958, and 1960, most people switched—in a nearly random pattern. Respondents were also remarkably inconsistent in their political views; many people would take a decidedly liberal position on one issue, then express a conservative view on the next (Converse, 1964, pp. 227-231). Converse concluded that the political opinions measured in most surveys, far from reflecting crystallized political viewpoints, might just as easily reflect mental tosses of a coin. Other researchers contested Converse's interpretation, ascribing the instability of survey responses to measurement error rather than a lack of well-formed opinions (Achen, 1975), or arguing that the intensity of politics during the 1960s had produced much more "ideological" thinking and opinion holding in the electorate (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976). In line with Converse's thesis, experimental studies indicate that a sizable proportion of survey respondents will express views on matters about which they have no information or over which they have expended no thought (Bishop et al., 1980). Even these ill-informed and on-the-spot opinions, however, may still be educated guesses that draw on underlying dispositions and are thus not completely random (Schuman & Presser, 1981, p. 159).

Such research has induced skepticism about interpreting an expressed opinion as a straightforward empirical referent for an unobserved attitude (following Thurstone) or even as a thought-out adaptation of several attitudes to a particular behavioral setting (following Wiebe). Instead, it suggests that expressed opinions ought to be taken only for what they manifestly are—surface-level behaviors that do not necessarily imply any underlying decision or attitude. This has indeed been the general trend in conceptualizing opinions, at least those gathered in typical surveys of public affairs (Zaller & Feldman, 1987). Researchers have retreated from the notion that they reflect a preexisting psychological structure

(i.e., an attitude), accepting the idea that they are often more transitory creations. Opinions may reflect only ephemeral responses, assembled on the spot.

Although less inclined than earlier researchers to see opinions on public issues as corresponding directly with fixed attitudes about them, contemporary students of public opinion have by no means lost interest in psychological underpinnings of expressed opinions. Toward this end, a variety of theoretical concepts—among them schemata, values, and group identifications—are invoked in accounts of opinion formation and change. Like attitude, they share the general characteristics of being (1) inferred, not directly observable; (2) construed as more basic and foundational than opinions, which are situational and superficial; and (3) used as theoretical explanations for overt expressions of opinion. Although the meanings of these terms are just as unsettled as is opinion itself (the social-psychological literature on each could easily fill a volume of its own), they are useful to consider as indicative of current thinking about the nature of opinions.

Schemata. Converse's (1964) claim that most Americans fail to possess any well-integrated system of attitudes about politics—that is, any overall liberal or conservative political ideology that organizes their views—has met mainly with empirical support and has come to be widely accepted (Kinder & Sears, 1985; Neuman, 1986; Luskin, 1987).[5] If political views are not commonly organized into a single overarching system or ideology, then how are they organized? One common answer to that question implicates another concept, currently popular in cognitive and social psychology, called a *schema*. A schema is "a cognitive structure that represents one's general knowledge about a given concept or stimulus domain" and that includes "both the attributes of a concept and the relationships among the attributes" (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, p. 13). In other words, a schema can relate to any information structure. It can be seen as an inferred system of related ideas about any particular concept—whether that concept is a person (e.g., "John"), a group (e.g., "lawyers"), an event (e.g., "going to class"), or even some abstract notion (e.g., "freedom"). Researchers have hypothesized a variety of structural forms for schemata. Some propose hierarchical systems of interconnected propositions (tantamount to theories), whereas others propose simpler, associative structures like event sequences (or scripts [Abelson, 1981]).

Psychological research illustrates that a schema, once activated, provides a kind of mental shorthand in thinking and perceiving. It directs attention to certain features of the environment, forms a basis for inferences about events and people, and also helps a person catalog information in memory (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Theoretically, schemata affect opinion formation in several ways. First, they constitute perceptual filters through which information relevant to a public issue must pass. Graber (1984) applied this notion in a series of in-depth interviews with a group of Chicago area residents, focusing on how they processed the news. Her respondents seemed to employ simple schemata about public affairs—small but organized clusters of beliefs about people and politics—to pick out particular items of news from the stream of information presented by the media. Graber argues, in line with earlier suggestions by Lane (1962), that people "morselize" their thinking about political affairs—they *do* actively make sense of different public issues, but they mostly interpret each issue separately, aided by a variety of schemata, without drawing on an overarching ideology or philosophy that is political in its construction.

Second, schemata may form the basis for inferences made in response to information about public affairs. An activated schema brings to mind a set of interrelated ideas and thus alters the associations people make in considering new information. Gillovich (1981) provides a particularly clear example. Subjects in his study read scenarios describing a hypothetical military crisis involving a foreign nation, experimentally prepared so that they would trigger either a "Vietnam schema" (by referring to Chinook helicopters, quickstrike invasions, and so forth) or a "World War II schema" (by referring to troop transports and blitzkrieg invasions). Gillovich found, as predicted, more support for U.S. military intervention in the hypothetical crisis among those who read the World War II version, presumably because they drew more favorable associations to the conflict and inferred a positive outcome. Not surprisingly, the ways in which news coverage schematically frames public issues is gaining considerable interest among opinion researchers (Iyengar, 1987; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). For example, televised depictions of poverty in terms of individual victims, rather than in terms of nationwide circumstances and trends, can lead viewers to think in terms of individual-level rather than system-level causes of poverty (e.g.,

work habits instead of economic forces). This can in turn affect their expressed evaluations of government performance with respect to the problem, such as ratings of how well the president is doing (Iyengar, 1987, 1990).

Theories about schematic information processing have had a profound impact on public opinion research. Even the attitude concept has recently been recast as a special subclass of schema (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989). Attitudes are, by this conception, "bundles" of interconnected beliefs about a particular object fused with global affect—good or bad—about it. Pratkanis and Greenwald (1989, p. 249) propose that an attitude is represented in memory by (1) an object label and rules for applying it (e.g., "A lawyer is someone who went to law school."), (2) an evaluative summary of that object (e.g., "I dislike lawyers."), and (3) a knowledge structure supporting the evaluation (e.g., an integrated set of beliefs about lawyers). Like all schemata, attitudes serve as perceptual and cognitive devices to aid in organizing thought about objects. Their main function, however, is thought to be heuristic; they simplify the task of evaluating objects. Attitudes also theoretically perform other functions for the personality. They can be ego defensive, for instance, playing a role in establishing, maintaining and enhancing a person's sense of self-worth (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989; see also Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956; Katz, 1960).

In cases where such attitude structures do exist, their heuristic function would dramatically reduce the need for constant and burdensome evaluation of new information. As Smith, Bruner, and White (1956, p. 41) suggested, attitudes allow people to size up a situation and render a judgment, good or bad. When a strongly held attitude about a particular object is evoked, a judgment may form quickly in the mind, so that subsequent information is subject to selective interpretation. An early demonstration of this phenomenon was provided by Cooper and Jahoda (1947), who found that cartoons designed to ridicule racial prejudice were interpreted in quite unintended ways by highly prejudiced people. Perhaps in defense of their egos, the very people targeted by the cartoons interpreted them as supporting their own prejudicial attitudes. More recent examples of the possible role of attitudes in opinion formation can also be found. For instance, evidence concerning public response to the AIDS crisis—which is identified closely with the homosexual community—indicates that those people

with negative predispositions toward homosexuals have been less receptive than others to scientific information about how the disease is transmitted. They are also more willing to support severely restrictive policies for dealing with AIDS patients (Stipp & Kerr, 1989; Price & Hsu, 1992).

Values. Like attitudes, values are conceptualized as evaluative beliefs, but they have a special prescriptive quality (Rokeach, 1973). Values are beliefs about what is desirable, either as an end state (Rokeach called these *terminal values*, e.g., "Everyone should have an equal opportunity to get ahead.") or as a means toward an end (what Rokeach termed *instrumental values*, e.g., "People should get ahead based on their own work."). Values theoretically function as standards for evaluating both personal and social behavior and as general plans for guiding personal action. Rokeach distinguished them from attitudes in several ways. First, whereas an attitude refers to an organization of several beliefs focused on a single object, a value is a single belief concerning a desired end state or preferred mode of conduct. Instead of being attached to an object, a value is attached to a goal. By this conception, particular objects become evaluated in particular situations when they affect the achievement of valued goals. Values serve as explicit standards for judging states and conduct, according to Rokeach, whereas attitudes merely imply general likes or dislikes. Because people have only as many values as they do beliefs about desirable end states or modes of conduct, it is likely that these number "only in the dozens, whereas attitudes number in the thousands" (p. 18). Values are also, Rokeach argued, more central to the personality than are most attitudes.

Values have been incorporated into research on mass media effects (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, & Grube, 1984) and employed in studies of public opinion more generally (Rokeach, 1960, 1968, 1973; Feldman, 1983). Feldman (1988) found that measures of support for some basic political values could explain a substantial amount of variation in opinions on specific public policies. A commitment to the value of equal opportunity, for instance, was strongly related to policy positions on a variety of domestic issues, as well as to a wide range of evaluations of Ronald Reagan's performance as president—even after controlling for party identification, liberal or conservative leanings, and socioeconomic factors. As Kinder and Sears (1985) suggest, research on the role of core values

in shaping public opinion is tantalizing. In principle, they note, core values "stand in an intermediate position between broad, encompassing ideological frames of reference, which have proven to be of little use in understanding the U.S. public's political thinking, and specific opinions on particular topics and candidates, which come and go as the seasons change" (p. 676).

Group identifications. Another theoretical construct that is sometimes thought to underlie opinion formation is one's *self-concept*, which is in large part based on a person's several group identifications. Social psychologists have long been concerned with the way attachments to groups can influence people's thoughts and behavior (as the extensive literature on reference groups testifies; e.g., Hyman, 1942; Hyman & Singer, 1968). Shibutani (1955) argued that perhaps the central problem of modern social psychology is that of ascertaining which group perspective a person employs in defining and reacting to various situations (p. 569). Turner (1985, 1987) defines the self-concept as an integrated cognitive system that includes two primary subsystems: the *personal identity*, or beliefs about one's unique psychological characteristics, personal tastes, and attributes (e.g., "I am honest" or "I am lazy"), and the *social identity*, composed of beliefs about one's memberships in various formal and informal social groups or categories (e.g., "I am Catholic" or "I am a father"). In other words, the self-concept is a person's organized system of beliefs about his or her personal and social characteristics.

Although it is conceptualized as a single, organized cognitive structure, the self-concept is adaptive and situation specific in its operation. Only particular elements are switched on at any given moment (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). A behavioral setting, especially one involving intergroup conflict or competition, can trig- [illegible] perspective is then adopted in perceiving and responding to the environment. In Turner's formulation, activated group identities function like group schemata, which can direct both perceptual and inferential processes. Public opinion researchers have found empirical support for these propositions. In cases of group conflict or competition, interacting members of the contending groups develop exaggerated, or "extremetized," perceptions of the competing opinion norms (e.g., Mackie, 1986; Price, 1989). Research also indicates that increasing the salience of a particular group

leads people to express more stereotypical group opinions (e.g., Charters & Newcomb, 1952; Kelley, 1955; Reid, 1983; Price, 1989).

As Price (1988) suggests, social identification may be centrally implicated in the formation of opinions on public issues, given that members of the spectator public are called on to take sides with one or another of the groups active within the "conflict system" of elite politics (Schattschneider, 1960). In other words, people's group identities are quite often made salient in connection with public affairs because of the group-based nature of much political debate. It is not surprising that Converse (1964), in examining the answers to open-ended survey questions about political issues, discovered that nearly 50% of a nationwide sample referred to their own group affiliations or other groups' interests, whereas only 3% or 4% of the population used ideological abstractions such as "liberal" or "conservative." For large portions of the electorate, Converse concluded, group attachments are central to political thinking.

Forming opinions. There is doubtless conceptual overlap among the terms *schema*, *attitude*, *value*, and *group identification*. They all refer to *information structures*, reflecting different aspects of information processing that may influence the calculation and expression of opinions. The degree to which these different concepts and processes can be precisely delineated operationally remains uncertain (McGuire, 1985, p. 241). What is certain is that the student of public opinion will find each of them invoked in efforts to explain how and why people come to express particular opinions.

Theoretically, when any single issue presents itself, only *select* schemata or attitudes or values or group attachments become activated. Once activated, however, these raw materials are the main factors that shape internal judgments and expressed opinions. Still, they alone would not entirely determine the response. New information about the problem at hand (i.e., beliefs not yet integrated with existing structures) and perceptions of how friends and valued groups might be responding to the problem also play their roles (Allport, 1937; Wiebe, 1953; Davison, 1958). Opinions are based partly on one's established system of beliefs and partly on a struggle to make sense of a new situation—a public issue. In the course of thinking about a particular problem, beliefs and attitudes are brought to mind and combined with whatever new information is available. In the context of a specified behavioral setting (e.g., a survey interview, a cocktail party, or a discussion

over breakfast), these ideas are compounded into an expressed opinion. This combination might look like what Abelson (1968) called an *opinion molecule*, composed of three atoms: (1) a belief (e.g., "This proposal will require new taxes."), (2) an attitude (e.g., "I hate taxes."), and (3) a perception of some kind of social support (e.g., "Everybody hates taxes.").

Thus an expressed opinion theoretically results from a kind of mental calculation. But a few important aspects of this calculation should be borne in mind. First, it need not be at all complicated. Research on the kinds of shortcuts or "judgmental heuristics" people employ in making decisions under conditions of uncertainty has established that judgments are often strongly determined by very few pieces—even one item—of highly salient information (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1982; Taylor, 1982). Because a calculated opinion depends heavily on which particular beliefs, attitudes, values, or group identifications are summoned to mind, differences between specific behavioral settings often produce very different opinions, even in the same person.

Second, the overt expression of opinions may have as much to do with shaping internal cognitive structures as the other way around (Bem, 1970). People can make active use of different opportunities to express various opinions, as a way of making up their minds. This is what the discursive model of public opinion (Chapter 3) would imply at the individual level. Just as the public takes time to respond collectively to a problem, so too an individual's covert judgment regarding an issue may also take some time to develop, gaining coherence and stability in response to thinking about the problem, gathering information, trying out various sides of an issue, and talking it over with others (Price & Roberts, 1987; Hochschild, 1981).

Sensitivity to this phenomenon leads researchers to speak of opinions as being in various states of "definition" or "crystallization" (Bryce, 1888, pp. 4-5; Katz, 1940; Kelman, 1974; Berelson et al., 1954, p. 183; Crespi, 1989, pp. 59-60). In the course of forming a coherent internal judgment, a person may well express a range of different opinions across a variety of behavioral settings (Atkin & Chaffee, 1972). Such a pattern may reflect not so much a series of pseudo-opinions but instead the natural interplay of cognition and behavior over time. As Kelman (1974) suggested, action and thoughtful reflection unfold together, often in a dialectical manner. In discussing an issue, people presumably make a series of attempts to express their evolving viewpoint. At the same time, they may actively infer their ideas and judgments from witnessing their own behavior (Bem, 1970). Expressed opinions can in this fashion constitute "test" behaviors that help a person along toward an eventual, well-formed judgment on the matter. The discursive process of opinion formation not only is an interpersonal or collective-level phenomenon but plays itself out at the individual level as well. One's very first encounter with a novel problem is likely to produce relatively impulsive and unreflective opinion.[6] But each opportunity to think about and express an opinion on the matter can be another step toward a more crystallized or decided view (Price & Roberts, 1987). Only when a covert opinion has crystallized should expressed opinions exhibit high levels of consistency across situations. The lesson of research on pseudo-opinions is that such crystallized judgments may be only too rare within the general population, at least on the issues typically of concern to political analysts.

Observing Opinions

Given these complexities, attempts to observe opinions can understandably involve far more than the straightforward recording of surface-level, yes-or-no responses to questions. Although the fundamental datum in public opinion research is just such a statement of support or opposition to some policy or candidate, researchers have good cause to probe these stated preferences more carefully and to learn more about the covert judgments, if any, underlying the expressions. In addition to finding out where a person says he or she stands on some proposal, pro or con, the serious analyst of public opinion seeks to learn much more. How much and what kind of information supports this opinion? Do any values or attitudes underlie it? How firmly held is it? Is it rooted in any particular group identification? How likely is it to change?

We noted earlier that research on opinion measurement has long been central to the field.[7] This line of research can be seen, in a certain light, as dedicated to purely practical ends—getting an accurate indication of an opinion. Certainly some methodological studies, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, had this goal in mind.

Since the late 1970s, however, research on opinion measurement has become more theoretically oriented (Bishop, Oldendick, & Tuchfarber, 1978, 1982; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Sudman & Bradburn, 1982; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988; Schwarz, 1990). By finding out how people are affected by changes in wording, what differences question order makes, and how changes in the response options affect opinion reports, analysts put themselves in a better position to understand the nature of opinions. A review of some of the key issues in opinion measurement is instructive, because each has important conceptual implications.[8]

What is it about? By definition, an opinion must be about something. Questions designed to solicit opinions must successfully focus people's attention on particular issues or problems. Converse and Presser (1986) stress the need to provide a common frame of reference for survey questions, so that all respondents can react to the same stimulus in formulating their reply. A variety of difficulties can surface. Some are obvious, as in the commonly recognized problem of *double-barreled* survey items that pose more than a single question (e.g., "Should movie-goers under age 17 be allowed to view violent or sexually explicit films?"). But other cases can be more subtle, as when a policy is associated with a group or individual, for example: "Do you support or oppose President Bush's policy in the Middle East?" This situation allows for selective responses to two stimuli—the policy and the president (sometimes called the *prestige problem;* Rugg & Cantril, 1944). The particular object of focus selected by a respondent may well bring to mind a different set of ideas.

The phrases and words used in opinion questions alter, if ever so slightly, the focus of the opinion given in response. Even minor changes in survey question wording can sometimes produce consequential shifts in results. For example, a number of experiments

"Do you think the United States should *forbid* public speeches against democracy," than when they are asked "Do you think the United States should *allow* public speeches against democracy"

in questions about federal spending tended to produce markedly less generous responses—nearly 40% less. He explains the effect

as a product of the different beliefs and attitudes presumably evoked by the two phrases. A reference to welfare triggers notions of government waste and bureaucracy, whereas the term poor does not. References to welfare may also evoke racial attitudes to a greater extent than do references to the poor.

Documented wording effects are plentiful (Cantril, 1944; Payne, 1951; Schuman & Presser, 1981). Yet the effects of question wording are often unpredictable, and in some cases ostensibly biased questions fail to produce the anticipated results. Schuman and Presser (1981), for instance, report experiments where apparently loaded phrases in questions about free speech, such as references to people whose ideas are considered *bad and dangerous*, did not affect the pattern of response. Nor did the substitution of the antiseptic phrase *ending a pregnancy* for *having an abortion* in questions about abortion rights have any appreciable impact.

Some variations in question focus do produce systematic and interpretable outcomes. For example, support among Americans for civil liberties in the abstract is quite high, even as support for specific policy implementations of those general principles is much lower (McClosky, 1964; Roll & Cantril, 1972). People are often ready to endorse broad principles, such as freedom of speech, even while they choose not to endorse some apparently clear applications of those principles, such as allowing communists to speak out (Prothro & Grigg, 1960). The change of question shifts the focus of attention, and thus the issue at stake shifts—in this case from the rather agreeable notion of "free expression" to the less attractive prospect of "communist propaganda."

What are the choices? Opinions are not only focused on a particular problem or issue but they are also choices about what is to be done. They express a preference for a particular course of action. In practice, opinion researchers do not directly solicit popular preferences, at least not in the sense of asking people to nominate their own preferred solutions to public problems. Instead, survey respondents are typically offered one or more proposals that have surfaced in public debate and that are considered viable policy options, and respondents are asked to indicate their support or opposition to those proposals. In the case of candidates running for office, they are simply asked whom they would prefer.

How many and what kinds of choices concerning any given problem to offer survey respondents are questions of both methodological

and conceptual import. There is a tendency, at least in commercial polling, to rely on yes-or-no responses to single questions as indications of public opinion on different issues, a practice that Crespi (1989) suggests reflects an implicit voting model of public opinion. Yet as Crespi notes, "the opinions that *underlie* voting behavior cannot be ascertained by a single question" (p. 77). Needed instead, he insists, are a variety of questions that address different aspects of a problem and that solicit people's views about alternative ways of dealing with it. Riesman and Glazer (1948) reacted similarly to simplified response options. "We should at least assume that another structure of opinion may exist," they argued, "in which every question has many sides, and many perspectives in which it may be viewed, each tinged with varying degrees of meaning and affect" (p. 634).

For this reason, opinion researchers often try to gauge reactions to a variety of proposals bearing on the same general problem, to gain a better appreciation of a person's central tendencies in responding to a problem (constructing, oftentimes, multiple-item opinion scales rather than relying on a single question). Alternate choices can also be captured through different question formats. Competing proposals can be rank ordered, alternatives can be evaluated through paired comparisons, or open-ended questions can be used (Converse & Presser, 1986).

The measures used in public opinion research usually have a basic two-sided, favor-or-oppose quality to them. This may reflect, as much as anything else, the controversial nature of public debate, which tends to resolve itself into opposing camps (Noelle-Neumann, 1970).[9] Among the most commonly employed formats is the *balanced question* that pits one alternative against another. For example, a question from the National Election Studies uses this balanced format: "Some people think that men and women should have an equal role in society, while others say that a woman's place is in the home . . . what do you say?" In such cases, the counterbalanced alternatives must be selected with care to ensure that they are properly opposing and equally extreme; otherwise, they may end up constituting separate questions or rendering a middle-ground choice inherently ambiguous (Rosenstone & Diamond, 1990).[10]

The selection of a question format and the choice of response alternatives will each in some way affect the eventual pattern of results. Schuman and Presser (1981) note that people, once they

agree to be interviewed, "accept the framework of the questions and try earnestly to work within that framework" (p. 299). These analysts consider the impact of question form primarily in terms of *question constraint*. That is, the options provided by the researcher are those that the majority of respondents will select, even though they might have selected a different form of response had it been offered. Any question format, Schuman and Presser (1981) propose, will somehow constrain responses.[11]

Is it well considered? One key dimension of an opinion is the amount of information that supports it. We have noted the remarkably low fund of information apparently available to most people for consideration in forming their judgments on public issues. As Lane and Sears (1964) point out, "one of the most interesting aspects of opinion on public affairs is the degree to which people will hold 'strong' views on matters on which they have almost no information" (p. 11). Questions surrounding the level of informational support are pressing, because they bear directly on the general public's fitness for holding opinions (see Chapter 2). There are also practical implications for describing public opinion—whose opinions should be counted? Given that many people seem not to follow public controversies at all, analysts sometimes attempt to discern which segments of the population have informational grounds for an opinion and which do not.

On occasion, researchers try to assess the store of relevant information available to a person in forming an opinion by asking factual questions about the problem. But identification of relevant knowledge is complicated. Information deemed relevant by the researcher may not seem relevant to the respondent, and vice versa. Commonly, analysts rely on people's self-appraisal of their fitness to provide an opinion. One basic method is to mention an explicit "don't know" option for responding to questions. A similar approach is to use *filter* questions, asking whether a respondent has heard about or thought about the issue before posing an opinion question. These procedures often reduce dramatically the proportion of people offering a viewpoint. Research demonstrates that offering "don't know" as one of the available response categories to a question usually results in a 20% increase in those who give no opinion (Schuman & Presser, 1981).[12]

There are other, perhaps more important, reasons to consider the range of ideas that people are able to summon in thinking about

public issues. The particular considerations brought to mind by a question may determine what kind of opinion is expressed. Zaller and Feldman (1987) asked respondents in a two-wave panel study to elaborate their answers to opinion questions by describing in their own words "the kind of things that come to mind" when thinking about the issues involved; in 50% of the cases, this procedure was carried out before people responded, and in 50% of the cases it was done retrospectively, after answering the opinion item. The results suggest that people—even if relatively uninformed—do not generate their opinions in an informational vacuum. There were on average four substantive comments per opinion question, and virtually *all* respondents raised at least one intelligible consideration. Around 30% offered thoughts that fell on both sides of an issue. The procedure was repeated with the same people a month later, and nearly 33% expressed conflicting thoughts about the same issue. As Zaller and Feldman put it, "the same people can answer the same question at two different times as if it were two questions. . . . A question about government services may raise the spectre of special interests and bloated bureaucracies at one interview, and an image of education, social security, and air safety at another" (p. 11). As we noted earlier, it is possible for a single person to provide opposing opinions without changing underlying attitudes or beliefs, if the frame of reference for the issue has shifted somewhat. A larger store of available information, in that it multiplies the range of ideas that can be summoned to mind, could even produce less rather than more consistency across occasions, at least until a crystallized judgment is determined.

How well organized? A related question concerns how organized a person's opinions may be. Once formed in the mind, an opinion may be tightly integrated with other opinions, loosely connected, or completely isolated (Lane & Sears, 1964). One person may consciously attempt to maintain a coherent set of interrelated viewpoints on public affairs, while another may harbor a collection of opinions that have rarely been thought about in relation to one another. References to *opinion organization* in research relate not so much to the structures underlying any given judgment as to the cognitive context for that opinion—how it is integrated, if at all, with other opinions. As Converse (1964) noted, most people do not maintain opinions that are organized consistent with any overarching liberal or conservative ideology. Opinions may instead be

organized into "opinion clusters," or groups of related opinions, with each cluster maintained in relative isolation (Lane & Sears, 1964). Or they may simply be scattered about.

How strongly held? Another set of characteristics relate in one way or another to how strongly an opinion is held. There are several related but conceptually distinct dimensions to consider in this regard: *intensity* (how strongly someone feels about a particular issue), *salience* (how mentally accessible a given opinion is), *importance* (how critical an issue or opinion is thought to be), and *certainty* (how confident one is that an opinion is correct).

Opinion intensity has received the most empirical attention, and it can be assessed in a variety of ways. One procedure involves two steps. First, a person's opinion (pro or con) is solicited, followed by a second question asking how strongly he or she feels. Even more common is a one-step procedure asking respondents to indicate their opinions on five- or seven-point scales ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (although, according to Converse & Presser [1986], this practice may confound extremity of opinion with intensity of feeling). Intensity measures are analytically quite useful to opinion researchers because they enable the separation of respondents in whom the opinion is deeply rooted from those for whom the answer is only lightly attached (Riesman & Glazer, 1948). Studies indicate that intense opinions are more stable over time and also more highly intercorrelated (that is, more highly organized) than weakly held opinions (Schuman & Presser, 1981).

The salience and importance of an opinion are often treated as interchangeable, although they may be distinguished conceptually (Krosnick, 1988a, p. 196). An opinion is salient when it is the focus of attention, and it is important when it is the subject of concern. The two attributes are perhaps causally related; the more time spent considering something, the more important it may seem. Conversely, things deemed important may occupy a large share of one's attention. Krosnick (1988a) argues that people are generally cognizant of and able to report how important they consider various issues to be. He has found that the over-time stabilities of opinions on social welfare programs, defense spending, detente, and guaranteed employment are markedly higher for those respondents who report that these issues are personally important (Krosnick, 1988b). Moreover, opinions on those issues people deem

important appear to play a more consequential part in their evaluations of the government's performance (Krosnick, 1988a, 1990).

confident that his or her opinion is correct. This dimension can be assessed in a number of ways, such as asking how sure a person is of his or her viewpoint or how likely the person thinks it is that his or her opinion will change. Riesman and Glazer even proposed in 1944 that "one might experiment with this by having the interviewer challenge or argue with the answer" (p. 635); however, this technique could be quite uncomfortable, and the results potentially misleading. A belligerent personality type could be mistaken for a firmly held opinion, and an introvert can be a person of quiet principle. Presumably, certainty would be correlated with the amount of information (e.g., the number of beliefs) supporting an opinion, although one's confidence in those underlying beliefs would be of critical importance. One fact may well be worth many pieces of information of unknown veridicality.

Will it lead to committed action? A question closely related to opinion strength is whether an opinion, once formed in the mind, will find an outlet in any determined political action. Opinions expressed verbally—even when they seem strongly held—may not agree with the opinions expressed through actions such as joining protest groups, writing public officials, or donating money to a cause. Cantril (1948) noted that abstract or intellectual opinions may not translate into "opinions upon which concrete judgments and actions are based" (Cantril, 1948, p. 41). For example, more people approve of a president's performance than say they would vote for him in an election "held today" (Crespi, 1989). There is a large literature on the general relationship of attitudes to behavior (e.g., Kelman, 1974; Schuman & Johnson, 1976; Liska, 1975; Cushman & McPhee, 1980; Cialdini, Petty, & Caccioppo, 1981; J. Cooper & Croyle, 1984), but the present question is more specific in nature. Will a judgment in favor of a particular policy translate into committed political action to ensure that end?

Schuman and Presser (1981) investigated this question by looking at two issues, abortion rights and gun control, and by comparing separate measures of intensity of feeling, importance (what they termed *centrality*), and committed action (measured by letter writing and monetary donations). The two issues produced differ-

ent results. In the case of abortion rights, affective intensity and importance predicted higher levels of political action, and uniformly so for people on both sides of the issue. But in the case of gun control, there was an interesting imbalance. Those respondents opposing gun permits—decidedly the minority—translated their subjective feelings of importance into political action, whereas people in the pro-gun-control majority did not. Schuman and Presser (1981) speculated that the National Rifle Association helped to mobilize the gun-control opposition. Organizational factors remind us not to assume that individual-level intensity, importance, or certainty will necessarily lead to active involvement. Effective public opinion, which depends heavily on political activity, may well diverge from the aggregate balance of expressed opinion.

How does it relate to other people? Perceptions of social support or opposition may be critical to the formation and expression of opinions. As Allport (1937) noted, "it may make a considerable difference in one's behavior, in supporting or opposing a particular measure, if he is aware, or even if he imagines, that others are reacting in the same manner" (p. 18). Just as consequential may be the impression that others are reacting in a different manner, in other words, that one is in an isolated minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Also basic to a person's opinion is an understanding of who makes up the relevant sides—what kinds of people are coming out in favor of a proposition and what kinds of people oppose it. An individual's perceptions of social alignments and cleavages within the public will form the social context within which opinions are formed (Price, 1988, 1989).

Noelle-Neumann (1984) argues that a full understanding of public opinion is not possible unless subjective estimates of the *climate of opinion* are also examined. This may be accomplished by asking people to report, in addition to their own opinions, what they suppose other people and groups think about particular issues, what they believe the future trend of public opinion will be, or which side will eventually win (Noelle-Neumann, 1984; Glynn & McLeod, 1984; Glynn, 1987, 1989; Glynn & Ostman, 1988). These subjective estimates are subject to systematic perceptual distortions, which can cause the perceived reality to diverge the objective reality of aggregated opinion (Fields & Schuman, 1976). For example, when political conflict between community groups is highly visible, less involved but attentive people can develop exaggerated

perceptions of opinion polarization within the public (e.g., Pearce, Stamm, & Strentz, 1971; Grunig & Stamm, 1973). Davison (1983) has suggested, and evidence seems to confirm, that people tend to overestimate the impact that a particular event or message will have on public opinion at large; this phenomenon is ca led the *third-person effect* (Cohen, Mutz, Price, & Gunther, 1988; Lasorsa, 1989; Mutz, 1989; Perloff, 1989). Distorted perceptions of public opinion may affect people's willingness to discuss their ideas, thus altering the dynamics of public communication and opinion formation (Noelle-Neumann, 1979).[13]

Social circumstances and expectations not only shape opinion formation but also enter directly into the measurement process itself. Opinions have varying terms of disclosure. They may be easily expressed in one setting but stifled entirely in another. Opinion researchers, who have long been sensitive to this issue, have adopted the standard practice of trying to maximize rapport between interviewer and respondent. This is usually attempted, for example, by the use of common language and by selection of interviewers who match as closely as possible the social characteristics of the respondent. Some research has suggested, however, that too much interviewer-respondent rapport can also produce less valid responses (Hyman, Cobb, Feldman, Hart, & Stember, 1954; Dohrenwend, Colombotos, & Dohrenwend, 1968; Weiss, 1968).

To summarize, the opinion researcher has at least seven important conceptual questions to entertain when gathering and interpreting observed opinions:

1. What exactly is this about? What is the focus of the opinion?
2. What alternative choices have framed or constrained the response?
3. How well considered is the response?
4. How is this opinion organized, if at all, with other views?
5. How strongly is it held? With what degree of certainty?
6. What are the chances it will result in committed political action?
7. What is the perceived social context within which this opinion has been formed and expressed?

Answers to these questions are by no means easy to obtain, but they are centrally implicated in efforts to assemble individual

opinions, once observed, into a composite picture of public opinion. I turn to this daunting task in Chapter 5.

Notes

1. Numerous other instances of *attitude* and *opinion* being used interchangeably can be cited. For example, Berelson and Steiner (1964, p. 557) note that the terms *opinion*, *attitude*, and *belief* "do not have fixed meanings in the literature, but in general they refer to a person's preference for one or another side of a controversial matter in the public domain—a political issue, a religious idea, a moral position, an aesthetic taste, a certain practice (such as how to rear children). Opinions, attitudes, and beliefs . . . are rational and/or emotional judgments on such questions." Here I will attempt to distinguish between opinions, attitudes, and beliefs in a way that is both consistent with trends in prior use and precise enough to avoid some conceptual confusions. It must be acknowledged, however, that the conceptual outline presented here is far from conventionally established in everyday research.

2. Thurstone (1928) did acknowledge that opinions could be imperfect indicators of attitudes, because people would in some instances conceal their true feelings. This suggested a conceptual gulf between opinions and attitudes, much like that later identified by Wiebe (1953). Thurstone, given his primary interest in attitude measurement, thought of the opinion-attitude distinction primarily in terms of the epistemic relationship between an empirical observation (opinion) and its unobserved conceptual referent (attitude). Wiebe's analysis proposed a more substantive theoretical relationship between the two as unique concepts.

3. People, of course, can have opinions about more or less anything, but our definition here, in line with general practice, is restricted to judgments about "actions or proposed actions of general concern." These can be distinguished from private opinions (Key, 1961, p. 11), which do not in any way relate to public concerns. This definition in no way implies that public opinions need be concerned only about matters of government policy. As long as the judgment deals with some matter of collective concern, it would be under this definition a public opinion. The nature of the expression need not be verbal, so long as it is "capable of being readily translated into words" (Allport, 1937, p. 14).

4. As noted above, this latter opinion-attitude distinction is not widely shared among opinion researchers, or at least it is not clearly reflected in everyday usage. One defense of the practice of using *opinion* and *attitude* interchangeably is the argument that, for all practical purposes, they are not empirically distinguishable (McGuire, 1985, p. 241). In other words, because we commonly depend on opinion measures to assess attitudes, how can we tell them apart? How would an attitude measure differ from an opinion question? Certainly physiological measures, such as galvanic skin response, pupillary contraction, or facial muscular tension would generally not be confused with opinions, although each has been employed to measure attitude. We readily grant, however, that the conceptual distinctions drawn here between opinions and attitudes have yet to be translated into precise operational distinctions. On the other hand, some consequential confusions may arise from interpreting opinions as attitudes,

principally because of the latter concept's theoretical history in social psychology. One wonders, for example, whether expectations of general stability in individual opinions would have been so difficult to dispel had researchers not directly equated opinions with attitudes. There seems little in the history of the opinion concept itself—rooted as it is in exchange, debate and argument—that would have supported such an expectation, and yet it has loomed as one of the major issues in research.

5. Although Converse uses the term *belief*, he analyzes (as do other political scientists who study mass belief systems) the organization of *opinions*, as described here.

6. This is not to say that initial responses to a novel issue will necessarily be tentative. If a particular problem evokes especially strong attitudes that strongly incline toward a particular response, then the initial opinion may very well be strong and determined. But certainly for many people, on many issues, initial responses are marked by some ambivalence (Hochschild, 1981). A progression from uncertainty to a crystallized opinion may well describe the typical process of opinion formation.

7. Schuman and Presser (1981) point out, however, that this research has come in cycles. During the 1940s, many experimental studies on question wording and question form were conducted (Cantril, 1944; Payne, 1951). These studies demonstrated the great extent to which the marginal distributions of question responses could be altered by even minor changes in wording. Partially because these effects became so widely recognized—even if not completely understood—the 1950s and 1960s produced far less experimental research on survey questions and answers. It was not until the mid-1970s that researchers once again directed systematic attention to analyzing the impact of variations in question wording, order, response options, and the like (see Schuman & Presser, 1981, pp. 1-10).

8. Certainly, I intend no comprehensive review of what is a large and expanding body of literature. Sudman and Bradburn (1974) and Schuman and Presser (1981) touch on most of the basic issues. A more recent collection of essays is Hippler, Schwarz, and Sudman (1987).

9. It is commonly observed that public debate is two sided and that public opinion, although initially disorganized, eventually simplifies along bipolar lines into two competing alternatives (see Bryce, 1988). Whether opinions are in some way naturally bipolar in nature has not been the subject of much research. But there is at least some evidence that the knowledge structures underlying attitudes and opinions are commonly bipolar in form (Judd & Kulik, 1980; Hymes, 1986; see Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989, pp. 264-266).

10. The simpler alternative is to use separate, unbalanced questions that ask for agreement to a single proposition (e.g., "Do you think that men and women should have an equal role?") rather than force a choice between two balanced alternatives. But these unbalanced questions are subject to a different problem, known generally as *yea-saying*, or response acquiescence. That is, people tend to agree to statements. To make matters worse, less-educated respondents are more likely to acquiesce than are better-educated people, thus systematically biasing the distribution of opinion on such questions (Schuman & Presser, 1981). It was largely an attempt to overcome the problem of yea-saying that lead to the adoption of balanced question forms. Evidence suggests that unbalanced questions using yes-or-no or favor-or-oppose responses generally produce results quite similar to balanced questions, although agree-or-disagree response scales might well be avoided, given that they appear particularly subject to acquiescence bias (Schuman & Presser, 1981). There is also some evidence that a series of balanced *branching* questions sorting people into many (e.g., seven) fully labeled categories—although more time-consuming than other question formats—will produce the most reliable results (Krosnick & Berent, 1990).

11. The choice between open-ended and close-ended questions provides a case in point. There is little doubt that the particular selection of responses for a close-ended question will constrain the results. But it is also the case that open-ended questions can constrain respondents, either by failing to remind them of responses they might have selected or by not making them aware of the full range of allowable answers (see Schuman & Presser, 1981, ch. 3). Respondents with relatively little education, for example, may not spontaneously structure their answers to open-ended questions in the same way or as elaborately as better-educated respondents—or researchers.

12. Interestingly, the increased proportion of "don't know" responses tends not to affect the relative proportions of people favoring or opposing particular proposals (Schuman & Presser, 1981, chs. 4, 6).

13. There is evidence that people implicitly compare themselves with other people when responding to survey questions—even questions about relatively innocuous behavior, such as the amount of time spent watching television. Schwarz (1990), after extensive studies of the response alternatives offered for survey questions, concluded that the range of responses offered is commonly interpreted by respondents as reflecting the distribution of responses in the general population (see also Schwarz, Strack, Muller, & Chassein, 1988). As Schwarz (1990) says, "the extremes of the scale are assumed to represent the extremes of the distribution, and values in the middle of the scale are thought to represent the usual or average behavior" (p. 281). Thus respondents use the scale as their social frame of reference in estimating their own response. They may also proceed to make various inferences about themselves by comparing their own answer with the distribution implied by the range of the response scale (e.g., if they think of themselves as extreme television viewers, with reference to the general population, they are more likely to consider television important to them).

5. *Conceptualizing Public Opinion Processes*

Our analysis to this point has separated out the collective and individual aspects of public opinion, treating them sequentially and more or less independently over the last two chapters. Although this order of presentation follows the historical trend in conceptualizing public opinion and serves as a useful organizing heuristic, it tends

to imply an either-or state of affairs. In fact the collective and individual aspects of public opinion have never been cleanly or easily divorced in research.

There has no doubt been a general shift from the collective to the individual side in conceptualizing public opinion (Carey, 1978; Price & Roberts, 1987; P. Converse, 1987). This swing was partly a movement away from abstract and hard-to-research notions of public opinion as a complex organic whole, toward a more tractable approach that starts with a representative sample of individual opinions "in all its narrowness and firmness" (P. Converse, 1987, S13-S16). What collective-minded theorists attempted to create conceptually from the top down, empirical researchers have tried to construct, brick by brick as it were, from the bottom up. The trend also reflects determined efforts to counter subjective and self-serving claims about the opinion of the public with more dispassionate and representative soundings of popular viewpoints.

Most researchers today recognize the value of individual-level opinion data gathered through survey research as a primary tool for studying public opinion. Yet, just as many recognize that a theoretical grasp of public opinion, and the way it works in society, also requires attention to the wider collective processes within which individual opinions are formed and expressed. The analyst of public opinion continues to face the challenge of trying to understand large-scale social and political processes: the constitution of publics around shared problems, the negotiation of competing policy proposals, the emergence of issues, and the formation of coalitions among political elites, shadowed by broader coalitions among their supporters or detractors in the spectator public. In the course of trying to *observe* these processes, however, the researcher is inevitably confronted by the need to understand individual phenomena: the attention given to public affairs, the determination of which issues are personally or socially relevant, the acquisition of information, the formation of opinions in people's minds, and the translation of those opinions into political action.

Collective and Individual Aspects

Public opinion research must somehow always straddle individual and collective concerns. Perhaps a bifurcated field of research

is inevitable, including some who study sociological processes and others of a more psychological bent who study individual opinions. Indeed most of the social sciences seem to have developed into level-specific specialties (Paisley, 1984). As Eulau (1986) points out, however, the tendency to separate individual- and collective-level theory and research and pursue them independently can restrict the analysis of political behavior. This separation fosters a tendency either to adopt a reductionist model—attempting to explain collective phenomena entirely in terms of individual processes—or to embrace the view that groups and collectivities must somehow be grasped as wholes and explained solely in terms of their integral, supraindividual qualities.

Accepting such a division fails to take seriously the *simultaneity* of individual and collective action. Group action, contends Eulau, emerges at once with the actions of individual members within the group. For example, when a college admissions committee debates the merit of an applicant, determines its "opinion," and then "decides" to admit the student, the group decision unfolds simultaneously with individual thinking, opinion formation, and decision making within the committee. On a larger scale, the decision of a community to levy a new tax to build shelters for the homeless unfolds simultaneously with many individual actions (paying attention, thinking, talking, and deciding), which are carried forward by the actions of public bodies within the community. Many different units, both individual and collective, are acting together. In the course of this collective action, there is a continuing reciprocity between individual behaviors and the social structures within which they occur. As Chaffee (1975) points out, "it is the actions of individuals that give life to the structural properties of political systems, just as the latter in turn constrain the behaviors of individuals" (p. 86).

We may well conceptualize public opinion as emergent from collective processes, but without gathering information about individuals within the public and how they behave, our ideas about the *process* of emergence will remain largely speculation. On the other hand, research that is limited to individuals' opinions investigates behavior *in* collectives, but neglects the behavior *of* collectives (see Eulau, 1986, p. 77). Some way of making public opinion processes intelligible for observation, measurement, and analysis, without decomposing them entirely into separate individual opinion processes, is needed.

Without pretending to have any simple solution to this dilemma, we can consider in a more integrative fashion the collective and individual aspects of public opinion.[1] Rather than study either publics or opinions per se, we conceptualize the *communication processes* through which publics are constituted and within which opinions on public affairs are formed. The concept of public debate, as we noted in Chapter 2, is tightly entwined with the concept of public opinion. Yet the notions of *discussion* and *debate*, although unproblematic as descriptions of interpersonal communication and opinion formation in small face-to-face groups, may require translation when applied to the larger-scale processes of public opinion formation. Here we examine more carefully the forms of discussion and debate that characterize large and heterogeneous publics (such as "the American public") and the various kinds of component units, both collective and individual, that enter into the process. We will also review some of the ways opinion researchers try to observe public debate.

The Notion of Public Debate

As we noted in Chapter 3, publics are constituted by shared problems (or we might say that people constitute publics when they join in consideration of ways to respond to a shared problem). Because a public is a dynamic collectivity, one that organizes around an issue through discussion over time, relationships between acting members within the public are continually changing. The term *public debate* seeks to describe a mass of people organizing into a public—in other words, people recognizing a problem, producing conflicting ideas about what to do, considering those alternatives, and trying to resolve the matter by building consensus for a line of action. How might we conceptualize these activities?

Dynamics of group decision making. The collective dynamics of opinion formation and change are most easily understood at the interpersonal or small-group level, where the concepts of discussion and debate are directly applicable. Social psychologists have long studied the ways people interact in resolving disagreements in face-to-face communication settings and especially social influence in these situations (Lewin, 1948; Cartwright & Zander, 1953). Moscovici (1985) proposes that social influence is "rooted in conflict and strives for a consensus" (p. 353). When conflict within a group occurs, members try to alleviate it or control it through discussion, thereby restoring group consensus or creating a new consensus. Conflict among group members stimulates discussion and, through it, opinion formation or change within the group. Attempts to resolve disagreements are both exploratory and persuasive, as people probe the issue; reflect on their own ideas about it; and consider the ideas, opinions, and motives of others. These communication and opinion-change processes, Moscovici (1976) proposes, are necessary for groups to survive. They allow collectivities to adapt to new social conditions (compare the conceptual model of the public discussed in Chapter 3).

Research on group decision making illustrates the mutual dependencies between the collective and individual aspects of discursive opinion formation. Relations within the group—such as the kind of disagreement at hand—can be critical in determining the manner in which both social influence and individual decision making proceed. When a firmly entrenched majority view is challenged, for instance, deviants are pressured to conform—provided that individual members of the majority feel strongly committed to enforcing the norm (Allen, 1965). On the other hand, when a deviant position is forcefully advocated by a persistent minority and the majority is not firmly committed to its position, uncertainty about the correctness of the norm can be created in the minds of majority members; the uncertainty in turn may lead to a conversion of the whole group toward the minority view (Moscovici, 1976, 1985). Other characteristics of the group, such as the disparity between opinions held by different factions, also have behavioral implications at the individual level. When there are many viewpoints expressed, with none strongly held or constituting a clear majority, members tend to converge through a process of group averaging (Moscovici, 1985) or an agreement not to disagree (Riecken, 1952). Wider rifts between well-defined majority and minority factions, however, lead to attempts by the majority to influence the minority—at least to a point (Schachter, 1951). When disagreements become too large, social influence attempts may cease entirely, and deviant members may be ostracized or leave (Festinger, 1950).

In each of these scenarios, various characteristics of the collective (e.g., the prior existence of a group norm, the extent to which

members of the majority feel strongly about their view, or the degree of majority/minority cleavage) are associated with different patterns in individual behavioral responses (e.g., increased or decreased communication, or changes in certainty and intensity). These behavioral responses, as they play themselves out, then contribute to the restructuring of group-level relations (e.g., expulsion of deviant members from the group, realignments of opinion, conversion to a new group norm, and so on). In the course of group debate, two interrelated phenomena occur. First, ideas accumulate in the public domain of the group, constituting a reservoir of shared frames of reference on the problem and proposals for solving it. Second, members respond to these ideas and proposals, privately and/or publicly. They may align with one of the proposals, staking out a position for or against other members of the group. Debate allows these processes to occur. Through discussion, ideas and information are exchanged, enabling the group to establish commonly understood, if competing, points of reference for construing the matter at hand. Discussion also serves as a medium for the expression and negotiation of opinion alignments within the group.

Even at the level of a small group, the resolution of disagreements through debate is not always (or perhaps even usually) egalitarian. Differences in power and patterns of communication may give extra weight to one opinion (in the case of an admissions committee, it may be the director of admissions), while discounting other opinions (e.g., from the newest and least experienced members). Structural characteristics of the group can produce differential levels of participation. Some (e.g., the newest members) may follow the discussion with attention and interest, but remain reticent. One member may care greatly about certain matters (e.g., the admission of disadvantaged applicants) and, as a result, engage aggressively in debate over those issues. On other issues, however, that same person's participation may be less intense. In other words, even within small groups, the distinction between *actors* and *spectators* (Chapter 3) is important to understanding the dynamics of opinion formation and change.

Public debate in larger social settings. Analysts often apply the terms *discussion* and *debate* to larger-scale public opinion formation as well. One must be extremely careful, however, in analogizing from face-to-face groups to large publics. The conceptual model of the public as a group engaged in discussion (Chapter 3) usefully

directs our attention to interdependent processes in public opinion formation that may be similar in rough outline to those we find in smaller communicating groups (Price & Roberts, 1987; Price, 1988; see Blumer, 1948). But our task in explaining these macroscopic communication processes is at least doubly complicated.

First, the wide variety of individuals and groups who may play a role, and the more differentiated roles they play, make description and analysis far more difficult. Members of the public include, for example, individual policymakers, governmental committees, organized pressure groups, less directly involved members of the active public (e.g., letter writers and contributors), and even more widely dispersed members of the attentive public who follow along with interest but who are only brought into direct participation through their votes or through opinion polls. On many issues, a large proportion of the population never becomes involved or is so minimally involved as to have no influence on the outcome.

Second, the means of communication employed in public debate are quite diverse. There are informal discussions—scattered and none too frequent—among individual members of the public. More formalized settings for debate are occasionally provided by governmental and educational institutions. The mass media provide commonality and some exchange, albeit of a far less interactive nature, between differing groups. Large-scale publics differ dramatically from smaller face-to-face groups in the technologies used for communicating among members. Large, geographically dispersed publics require more systematic forms of collective participation—not just loose interpersonal coalitions, but formal political organizations and parties. These organizations can communicate grass-roots opinion upward to the agencies charged with acting on the public's behalf; they can also communicate elite opinions downward, serving as channels for informing, persuading, and activating members of the attentive public. Large publics require more systematic means of exchanging ideas—not just free-flowing discussion, but mass-mediated exchange and organized opinion gathering and distribution (e.g., editorials, letters, and opinion polls)—to establish the fund of shared considerations in the public domain.

Reliance on mass media for public debate introduces communication biases that are not present in small groups. Participants in face-to-face debate need not rely on intermediaries for learning about what is going on, relaying messages, and following group

deliberations. The mass communication channels that serve as the medium for public debate, however, are much different. Notwithstanding attempts at objective reporting, the news media are selective in determining what kinds of messages are relayed. Beyond their facilitative role in gathering and exchanging ideas, mass communicators also assume a much more directive role in trying to shape and mold opinion. Media elites are not merely passive conveyors of public information and debate, but active participants as well (see discussion of the "correlation" function of the media below).

The terms *debate* and *discussion* thus might have been applicable to learned exchanges in the 18th-century salons of Paris, but they are at best loose metaphors for describing the more highly organized means of mass communication in modern publics. The electoral machinery of representative democracies and political parties was among the first arrangements developed (Chapter 2). These institutions have been supplemented by more interactive forms such as mass letter-writing campaigns, opinion polls, and other rapid feedback mechanisms (see Beniger, 1986, ch. 8). In spite of these sophisticated means of communication, however, literally interactive links among all members of a very large public are clearly not possible in the same way they are in small, localized groups (Price & Roberts, 1987). Modern communication technologies may have enabled the enlargement of public consciousness (Cooley, 1909), but they have not come close to creating any sort of town meeting writ large (see Arterton, 1987, on prospects for "teledemocracy").

Political Actors, Journalists, and the Attentive Public

Although patterns of leadership show up even in small-group discussion, the differentiation between leaders and followers—between political actors and political spectators—emerges as one of the central structural features of large-scale public debate (Chapter 3). Political actors (or elites) are those people trying to make a difference in the behavior of the collective. Actors, both within and outside the established political system and often organized into pressure groups, create public issues in the first instance by formulating and then advocating alternative policies. Public debate refers primarily to *the debate between contending political actors*—one

that is displayed by the mass media for people in the attentive public to observe and to contemplate (and, far less frequently, to join). Although the involvement of the active public (members of the press included) is directed toward formulating a favored plan for action and persuading others of its merits, the involvement of spectators in the attentive public primarily consists of thinking about what they read and see as well as in forming and expressing (sometimes) opinions on the question. Spectators are drawn into the public for a variety of reasons. They may be especially concerned about the particular matter at hand, they may habitually follow the news and like talking about public affairs, or they may be caught by happenstance in a social situation (e.g., a conversation at work) where their opinions on the issue are solicited.

Public as spectator. Although the relative size of the active public and the attentive public may vary for different issues, on any given issue the spectators vastly outnumber the actors. The audience perspective assumed by the great majority who are party to public debate is worthy of note. Carey (1978) sees the eclipse of the public as a sphere of active discourse in modern society. The mass media, according to Carey, have transformed the "reading public—a group who spoke to one another in rational and critical ways—into a reading and listening audience" (p. 854; see also Mills, 1956). But this structural feature of large-scale publics, for better or worse, is almost certainly nothing new. Bryce remarked on it in 1888. What the masses contribute to democratic government, Bryce argued, is not so much contending ideas or policies (which political leaders work out among themselves) as "sentiment" about their leaders' actions and proposals, which when expressed publicly—through votes, demonstrations, letters, or other means of communication—constrain the actors' behavior (Bryce, 1888, pp. 7-8). In the same vein, Lang and Lang (1983) observe that the opinions of those in the attentive public are basically "expressions of praise or censure" directed toward the individuals and groups active in politics (p. 23). Still, an attentive public is more than just an audience.[2] Its members contribute not only attention but also at least some thought to the matter at hand. An attentive public is an audience that cares enough about an issue to think about it, to find out what others think, and to form some ideas about what ought to be done. It is the holding of opinions that characterizes its members (Chapter 4).

The political power of an attentive public is on occasion exercised directly (e.g., in an election), but it also operates indirectly and more continuously through the perceptions of the political actors who play to the audience and who gauge their own efficacy in the political world by indicators of public response. Baker (1990) argues that the idea of public opinion emerged in the 18th century largely as a political invention—as a source of authority that could be claimed to legitimize a given policy or proposal. Elites have used public opinion as a rhetorical weapon in political debate ever since. Actors invest heavily in trying to interpret opinion within the attentive public (e.g., through tracking polls), perhaps just as heavily as they invest in trying to shape and direct it (see Sabato, 1981). Although elites may not need widespread support for their policies, most would at least require an indication that there is not insurmountable opposition to their cause. Actors' proposals take on greater weight when coupled with some evidence that the public is in their corner (or that a sizable number of people, even if not a majority, will support them). For example, public approval ratings can be an important source of presidential influence in Congress (Rivers & Rose, 1985). The political power of an attentive public lies, then, "not so much in what it does, but in political actors' perceptions of what it *might* do" (Price & Roberts, 1987, p. 805; Key, 1961; Lang & Lang, 1983, pp. 22-25).

The roles played by journalists. Journalists, by covering political events and monitoring the activities of political actors, enable attentive publics to form around elite disagreements. In this respect, the media carry out a *surveillance* function for their audiences (see Lasswell, 1948). This look-out function of the press is perhaps the most prominent public service attributed to, and claimed by, the news media. It is quite commonly reflected in the names of newspapers, which frequently include the words *sentinel, monitor, clarion, observer,* and *intelligencer.* As surveillance agents, journalists try to alert publics to problems. They bring news about the behavior of political elites—their actions, presumed intentions, and internal disagreements—to the attention of their audiences. In so doing, reporters provide the principal mechanism for allowing an attentive public to monitor the political environment—albeit one that may be constrained by institutional, professional, and organizational factors (e.g., Breed, 1955; Roshco, 1975; Ettema, Whitney, & Wackman, 1987). The press is, after all, largely dependent on

political actors for supplying the news, much of which is planted by virtue of skillful public relations in the form of press releases, interviews, and news conferences.

Journalism also carries out a *correlation* function for the attentive public by helping to coordinate its own internal responses to the political environment (see Lasswell, 1948). That is to say, the news media bring together contrasting ideas and views within the attentive public, report to its members what others think, and thus help to organize its collective reaction. Schramm (1964, p. 38) likened this function to tribal councils in less-developed societies, which solicit viewpoints and debate alternatives in trying to coordinate the actions of a village. Although Price and Roberts (1987) label this the *poll-taking* function of the media, it is exercised not only (or even principally) through opinion polls but also through letters to the editor, reporter-on-the-street interviews, and other informal characterizations of public opinion. In short, the media allow the attentive public to keep track of political actors (surveillance) and organize its responses to them (correlation).

Journalism performs these same two functions for elites in the active public as well. The identical item of news or commentary can serve opposite functions, however, depending on one's particular perspective—as a spectator or as an actor in the process. Media characterizations of opinion within the attentive public (which help to correlate its internal responses) are simultaneously a means of surveillance for elites (by helping them monitor the attentive public's reactions). Actors pay close attention to the news to see how well they are doing. The extent to which the mass media help to correlate elite responses to issues may be less apparent, but it is no less central to the process. News about other political actors offers elites an arena for learning about, understanding, and reacting to one another. Political elites use the media not only to communicate with their supporters and opponents in the attentive public but to talk among themselves as well. Statements they issue ostensibly to the general public (press conferences and appeals to the public through the media) are often intended as messages to other elites (see, e.g., Lang & Lang, 1983; Linsky, 1986).

The news media, therefore, provide a principal means by which the members of a public communicate. Perhaps most important, journalism allows political actors and spectators to interact. The news supplies continuing accounts of what is unfolding on the

elite political stage (surveillance for the attentive public, correlation for the active public). Journalists also register how the audience is reacting to the play as it unfolds (correlation for the attentive public, surveillance for the actors). As with elections, polls, and political parties, the news media are mechanisms—perhaps now the dominant mechanisms—that allow publics to carry out their business.

As noted, the media are more than just common carriers for public debate. In addition to providing channels through which other actors get their messages across, media elites promulgate their own views through partisan political analysis and through editorial endorsements of policies and candidates. This activist role of the media, especially newspapers, ensures continuing concern over possible biases in news and editorial practices, owing to the political leanings of network executives, publishers, producers, or rank-and-file journalists. Conservative critics often charge the media with liberal bias, drawing on studies suggesting that journalists, especially those in the elite media, are disproportionately liberal (e.g., Lichter & Rothman, 1981; see also Noelle-Neumann, 1984). But the canons of journalism exercise strict constraints against reportorial bias, and the case for liberal slant in actual news coverage is much harder to establish (Robinson, 1983; Merten, 1985). When one turns to editorials, where no such strictures against bias exist, an opposing case for conservative bias can easily be made. A review of newspaper endorsements in presidential elections since 1972, for example, shows a consistent pattern of stronger support for Republican candidates than is reflected in either the party leanings or the voting patterns of the general population (Stanley & Niemi, 1988, p. 59).

Critics raise other concerns about the ability of the press to carry out their surveillance and correlational roles successfully. In the eyes of some observers, the press appears more interested, and far more successful, in simply gaining attention than in serving as an effective monitor of public affairs or as a forum for free-flowing debate (Lasswell, 1948; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948; Carey, 1978; Bagdikian, 1985). Lasswell (1948) argued that the media assemble *attention aggregates* more readily than they assemble interested and engaged publics for political affairs. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) speculated about a possible *narcotizing dysfunction* of mass communication. A continuous stream of tidbits about public affairs, they theorized, might allow people to become too settled in their roles as spectators. By emphasizing the unique, the unusual, and the recent, journalism may win audience attention but in effect suppress public engagement and activity. Being informed or an "inside dopester" may substitute for being concerned and actively involved (Riesman & Glazer, 1948).[3] As Dewey (1927) suggested, the difficult but central challenge of journalism—Lippmann (1922) might say its impossible challenge—is first to engage the attention of and then to *activate* the public.

Observing Public Opinion

Interest in the process of public debate, concerns about its quality, and questions about its role in policymaking feed into a wide variety of specific research applications. Applied public opinion research, in the form of commercial opinion polling, is itself an institutionalized participant in public debate. The practical concerns in commercial research center on providing media audiences or elite political clients with timely and accurate poll data bearing on issues of the day. Yet there are normative concerns as well. Some pollsters have pressed for educating consumers about the susceptibilities of polls to error and advocated the design of polls that contribute more usefully to public debate (Crespi, 1989; Cantril, 1991). Academic researchers add to these concerns various theoretical and methodological goals, such as understanding the nuances of opinion measurement, grasping the formation and change of public opinion, learning how it is affected by mass media content (including publicized poll results), and comprehending the role it plays in policy formation. Regardless of their motives, these researchers share a basic interest in observing public opinion as it takes shape and changes over the course of public debate. Although both commercial and academic opinion researchers rely heavily on sample survey methods, they also use other observational techniques, depending on the particular goals at hand.

Indicators of public opinion are drawn from many sources, generally through one of three techniques:

nizations (mainly used in representative sample surveys but also in experimental settings).

Content analyses of political platforms, organizational memoranda, private

officials, organizational elites, activists, or focus groups.

Although no one of these observations is sufficient to describe

at a given time, as well as over time. Each observation is a snapshot of public opinion, taken from a different angle. These pictures allow us to look at different parts of the same general process.

process more responsive to majority views (Gallup & Rae, 1940), to expand the range of public debate (Crespi, 1989, pp. 102-104), to understand people's frames of reference for political affairs

Cook et al., 1983).

Using survey data. One of the principal uses of general population survey data is the summary description of public opinion. The

with a support-or-oppose type of question (Cantril, 1991).

The percentage of survey respondents supporting some policy or candidate, however, represents only one facet of public opinion—just as direction, pro or con, is only one dimension of opinion at the individual level. Many other variables can also be observed through survey research. For example, a rough collective-level analogue to individual-level uncertainty might be the degree of disagreement or consensus. Imagine samples of individual opinions from two communities and the distribution of those opinions within each community, as arrayed along a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." A state of profound disagreement within one community would be observed as a U-shaped distribution of individual views—a distribution, let's say, in which about half the people are strongly opposed and nearly as many are

strongly in favor. A state of consensus in the second community, on the other hand, might be observed as a bell-shaped distribution with a strong central tendency and relatively few people at the extremes of the scale. We would probably not want to speak of these communities as being alike in their collective states of opinion, even though the median or average positions could very well be similar.

This is not so much a case of having competing concepts of public opinion as it is a matter of having several possible descriptions. There are a variety of measures that can describe individual opinions—not only their direction, pro or con, but also the level of informational support, intensity, stability, importance, and so on (Chapter 4). These data can be used in public opinion research not just to study the ways opinions develop and change at the individual level but also to describe aggregate opinion and changes over time. Aggregate empirical representations of public opinion may draw on any of these analytical classifications or dimensions, provided, of course, that the appropriate survey measures have been gathered.[4] The balance of support in a community for two sides of an issue can be analyzed, not just in terms of the relative percentages expressing support or opposition to particular proposals (as a typical poll might report) but also in view of the comparative levels of opinion intensity, certainty, or rates of political activity observed on each side of the issue (Schuman & Presser, 1981, recall Chapter 4).

The rationale for focusing on any particular feature of public opinion stems from substantive theoretical concerns. Some public opinion research, for example, has focused not on people's opinions per se but instead on aggregate *issue agendas*—the topics people have opinions about (Cohen, 1963). Agenda-setting research investigates the extent to which public attention to particular problems depends on the volume of news coverage devoted to them (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, 1990). In studies of pluralistic ignorance, researchers have aggregated people's perceptions of others' views to describe perceived opinion *climates*, which can then be compared with distributions of actual opinion. This allows for the description of a rather complex state—the extent to which the collective correctly perceives its own state of opinion (O'Gorman, 1975; Fields & Schuman, 1976; O'Gorman with Garry,

1976; see also the spiral of silence, Noelle-Neumann, 1984; and the third-person effect, Davison, 1983). Other research has focused on levels of opinion *conflict* across communities, which is related to community structure (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980). In short, researchers can describe far more than just the overall direction of collective opinion states, just as they seek to determine much more about individual opinions than just which side people favor.

Although survey-based descriptions of public opinion draw mainly on data collected from individuals in general population studies, surveys need not be limited to this kind of application. Groups that may play a role in shaping public opinion—such as businesses or professional organizations—can also be surveyed, either through their official spokespersons (Namenwirth, Miller, & Weber, 1981) or through their memberships (Granberg, 1984). Political elites, who would comprise only a very small proportion of a general population sample, can be independently surveyed. Researchers have surveyed, for example, newspaper editors (Olien, Tichenor, Donohue, Sandstrom, & McLeod, 1990), foreign policy opinion experts (Rosenau, 1963), business leaders (Russett & Hanson, 1975), government bureaucrats (Jennings, 1969), and political lobbyists (Milbrath, 1963). In a study of the 1958 congressional elections, Miller and Stokes (1963) surveyed incumbent members of Congress and their challengers regarding issues in the campaigns, perceptions of their constituents' opinions, and their ideas of what might affect the vote. Survey techniques can thus be used to assess many features of many different units—both collective and individual—that play a role in public opinion processes.

Using content analysis. Although survey research is the most common method of observing and studying public opinion, it is by no means the only way. Naturally occurring byproducts of public debate provide analysts with unobtrusive observations from several different angles. Official statements, memoranda, reports, and minutes of public meetings are quite useful for studying the behavior of political actors (Cook et al., 1983). The content of popular media can be investigated as persuasive stimuli that shape public reactions to issues (Fan, 1988), as inputs to policymaking (Cook et al., 1983), or as the shared fund of information in the public domain (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). These materials provide data that complement those gathered through survey interviews. The analysis of such content usually takes advantage of quantitative methods (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 1980), but other interpretive approaches can also be useful (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

The analysis of mass media content plays a prominent role in public opinion research. Although Allport (1937) warned early on against the danger of mistaking opinions that appear in the press for public opinion (what he termed the "journalistic faliacy"), he nonetheless acknowledged that news accounts and editorial depictions of public opinion could become self-reinforcing (p. 21). Viewpoints featured by the media are certainly not to be confused conceptually with those of their audiences, but there are good reasons to suspect the former play a significant role in the formation of the latter. Over the last decade, researchers have begun to monitor aggregate trends in media content and study their relationships to trends in audience opinion assessed through polls (MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987; Fan & Tims, 1989). Fan (1988) has developed an "ideodynamic" model, adapted from the biological sciences, to predict election campaign poll results from a content analysis of Associated Press wire service news stories. Fan's model, which estimates the impact of positive or negative messages about candidates based on factors such as the number of messages in the news environment and the size of the target population, appears to produce very accurate poll predictions. His controversial methods and results have again raised questions about the autonomy of public opinion, and whether it is a more or less mechanical reproduction of elite opinion expressed by the media (Chapter 2).

Public opinion researchers have also taken a more interpretive approach to media content analysis, to gain insight into the way media frame the terms of public debate. Gamson and Modigliani (1989), for example, focus on identifying the *cultures* surrounding different issues. Every issue, they argue, has its own "catalogue of metaphors, catch-phrases, appeals to principle, and the like" (p. 2). Participants in public debate encounter these, not as individual items, but as schematic clusters of ideas or interpretive packages. By the culture of an issue, Gamson and Modigliani mean "the complete set of interpretive packages that are available for making sense of it" (p. 2). To investigate the evolution of these packages and issue cultures, they analyze a wide range of media content, including television network news, news magazine articles, editorial cartoons, and syndicated newspaper columns, tracking a single issue at a time.

Using less-structured survey techniques. Just as content analysis has its comparatively more structured and its more interpretive, qualitative versions, so also do attempts to survey public thinking. In addition to the more structured forms of interviewing, such as the close-ended question formats most commonly found in lengthy, large-sample questionnaires, researchers sometimes make use of less-structured approaches, such as *depth interviewing* and *focus groups*.

The trade-offs between highly structured question asking—with definitive, predetermined response categories—and more flexible interviews—leaving the framing of answers, and questions, up to the respondent—have been recognized in public opinion research for many years (Skott, 1943; Link, 1943; Lazarsfeld, 1944; Merton & Kendall, 1946). Merton (1987) notes that focused interviews were employed in many early media effects studies, such as the study of radio marathons (Merton, Fiske, & Curtis, 1946/1971), to "help shape the interpretation of the quantitative data" from representative surveys (p. 555). The focused interviews were aimed primarily at generating new ideas and hypotheses, which were then subjected to further testing through more definitive methods. In such cases, the more interpretive and qualitative procedures are used as supplements rather than as alternatives to more structured techniques.

Focus group research is especially popular in studies of consumer attitudes and behavior (Calder, 1977), but it also finds application in public opinion research. Groups of people are brought together to discuss a particular topic, and their interactions are recorded and studied. Although these techniques sacrifice representativeness (an undeniable strength of the sample survey), open-ended questioning in focus groups can help the investigator understand the thought processes used to arrive at opinions (Hochschild, 1981; Graber, 1984). Gamson (1988) endorses focus groups as part of a *constructionist methodology* for assessing public opinion. He says that researchers need some way of making "underlying schemata visible in some fashion, preferably by allowing us a glimpse of the thinking process involved" (p. 20). This can be accomplished by observing peer group conversations (discussions among friends or acquaintances in a member's home) that are focused on a topic of public concern and guided by a *facilitator*. Transcripts from these conversations are then interpreted by the analyst, in part to see which elements of media discourse have become part of the public's tool kit for making sense of public affairs (Gamson, 1988).

Observing the Process of Public Debate

No matter what observational techniques are used, studying the dynamics of public debate—the way actors and spectators interact over time—is quite challenging. In 1948, Blumer charged that public opinion research was failing entirely at this task. He submitted that pollsters were "obtuse to the functional nature of public opinion in our society" (p. 543), focusing on individual opinions to the exclusion of functional groups and organized channels of political influence. He suggested that researchers should begin investigating policymakers, determining what particular forms of opinion expression come to their attention and affect their actions. Research could then proceed by "tracing these expressions backward through their own various channels and in doing so, noting the chief channels, the key points of importance, and the way in which any given expression has come to develop and pick up an organized backing out of what initially must have been a relatively amorphous condition" (Blumer, 1948, p. 549).

Hyman (1957) echoed Blumer's concerns. Although research had made considerable gains in psychological theory about opinion formation and change, Hyman argued, it had far less to say about large-scale social processes or about the relationships between public opinion and the processes of government. This was so because researchers rarely gathered time-series data tracking the development of public opinion around a particular issue or the interaction of public opinion with the formal political system. Poll data, he noted, are collected only after an issue has already come to the fore and only so long as the issue remains pressing. Data on the initial and closing phases of public debate are largely unavailable (Chapter 3). For public opinion theory to advance, data over the life course of an issue would be needed (Hyman, 1957).

Since that time, the field has been responding in a variety of ways to the calls of Blumer and Hyman for process-oriented research.

Exemplary are the studies undertaken by an interdisciplinary research team at Northwestern University (Cook et al., 1983; Protess, Leff, Brooks, & Gordon, 1985; Leff, Protess, & Brooks, 1986; Protess et al., 1987).[5] They have typically followed investigative news reports in Chicago area mass media, tracing their influence on both public opinion and policymaking. Taking advantage of advance notice about forthcoming investigative news reports, the researchers gather data at several time points before and after media disclosure of a problem. They conduct random sample surveys of the Chicago metropolitan area and interviews with purposive samples of interest group leaders, journalists, and policymakers. They also analyze legislative, budgetary, and regulatory documents, media coverage, transcripts of hearings, and other records. The researchers have studied, for example, a television program on home health care fraud and abuse, a local newspaper series on rape, and two local television reports on police brutality and toxic waste disposal. Effects on audiences, on political elites, or on policy outcomes were found in each case; but these effects were far from uniform across issues. The role of popular opinion, in particular, varied. The news story that seemed to produce the strongest policy response—one on home health care fraud—seems to have done so largely without active public participation. Policy was affected even *before* the story was presented to the public, through the collaborative efforts of policymakers and investigative journalists (Cook et al., 1983). Nonetheless, when the program aired it did have appreciable effects, both among members of the attentive public and among political elites. The prior response of policymakers, therefore, may have been preemptive in anticipation of the program's expected influence (an outcome that may have been intended by the program all along; see Davison, 1983).

Conclusion: Public Opinion as a Communication Concept

Questions surrounding public opinion—normative, theoretical, and empirical—have persisted for two centuries and will no doubt continue. In this book we have considered the general concepts underlying those questions, rather than the answers that have so

far been provided. This review is not intended to provide any singular definition of public opinion. Instead, it seeks to identify the basic themes running through various writings that use the concept.

Perhaps the most prominent single theme to emerge from our investigations is the close connection of public opinion with processes of discussion, debate, and collective decision making. This connection was traced, in Chapter 2, to public opinion's origin and early history as a political-philosophical concept. The linkages to discussion and debate were retained through public opinion's subsequent adaptation and elaboration as a sociological construct (Chapter 3) and, albeit to a lesser extent, as a psychological construct (Chapter 4). Given these linkages, public opinion—whether viewed in philosophical, political, sociological, or psychological terms—remains fundamentally a communication concept. Chapter 5 suggests that public debate occurs mainly by virtue of interactions between elite political actors and their attentive spectators, facilitated in several important ways by the press.

Conceptualizing public opinion in terms of discursive processes, such as those sketched here, should not be confused with adhering to any grass-roots model of political decision making. The democratic foundations of the concept of public opinion are indisputable; far less so are the democratic foundations of day-to-day political decisions, even when they are formed out of public debate. *Discussion* may unfortunately imply too deliberative, too egalitarian a process (*debate* even more so). Decisions relying on public opinion are made through publicity and communication, but communication is just as much a tool for persuasion as for information gathering and as potentially useful for managing opinions as for soliciting them. Public debate, no matter how enlightened or reasoned, involves each of these processes to some extent. We may well compare public debate to a town meeting—provided we keep in mind that although some town meetings enjoy free-flowing debate, there are other meetings for which almost no one shows up, at which powerful leaders and organized coalitions dominate, and at which people with minority viewpoints are shouted down or left standing outside. Among the charges of public opinion research, perhaps its central charge, is finding out which analogies come closest to describing how we typically conduct our public affairs.

Notes

1. The theoretical and methodological problems of dealing with levels of analysis in research (often referred to as *micro-macro* issues) are myriad and have attracted considerable attention in the social sciences. The articles collected in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel (1981) and in Alexander, Giesen, Munch, and Smelser (1987) explore many of the fundamental issues. For general discussions of levels of analysis in communication research, see Pan and McLeod (1991) and Nass and Reeves (1991).

2. The term *public* is certainly used from time to time in a way that treats it as synonymous with any *audience* or *following*. Examples would include references to the golfing public, the movie-going public and the like, or references to the fans of an entertainment celebrity ("her adoring public"). Throughout our treatment here, we have used the concept in a more distinctive way, confining it to matters of general disagreement or shared concern, in other words, to public issues and public affairs.

3. Despite persistent speculation about the possible role of the news media in cultivating public passivity, critics of the media present no clear evidence for such an effect. Indeed, as noted in Chapter 3, attention to the news goes hand in hand with *higher*—not lower—levels of political participation.

4. The aggregation of individual measures to describe collective units is extremely useful in analysis, but it is not without its potential conceptual hazards (Eulau, 1986; Price, Ritchie, & Eulau, 1991). The transformation of properties from units at one level to the next (e.g., from individuals to a group) often results in characteristics that are not isomorphic across levels. As Lazarsfeld and Menzel (1961) illustrated, for instance, a hung jury is indecisive as a collective, but not at the individual level (in fact, quite the opposite is the case; the members of a hung jury are too decided to compromise). With care, however, an analyst can identify and explore many useful distributive and relational properties of relevant collective units, using data collected from its subunits.

5. Another noteworthy example, from political science, is Bartels's (1988) investigation of candidate momentum in presidential primaries. Bartels analyzes the nominating process as a dynamic one, in which the public's preferences form and change in response to media coverage and campaign maneuvering. Bartels characterizes the primary system, for all of its seeming quirks, as an effective mechanism for public choice, one in which "diverse individual preferences can be shaped and modified by social interaction to produce, if not a consensus, at least a genuine majority for a single alternative" (p. 307).

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